

SISTERS

a comedy drama in two acts

by

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SISTERS

SYNOPSIS

Facing the disapproval of her religious community for her controversial work in gay and lesbian ministry, Sister Joanna invites five of her former convent classmates—now ex-nuns—to a twenty-year reunion in the hope of eliciting their support. When Mother Naomi threatens her with dismissal, Joanna proposes a plan to the others to make the Superior back down. The weekend's events force the women to confront their own sexuality and life choices, as well as their relationships—past and present—to one another.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Mother Naomi, 55-60. Once Mistress of Novices, now Provincial Superior of the Sisters of Our Lady of Good Hope. A committed, pragmatic leader, but genuinely warm and sympathetic. (Wears a full-length traditional habit and veil in the Prologue; thereafter, a modified habit--dark suit with white blouse, short veil, pumps.)

Sister Joanna, 38-40. An activist. Intelligent but vulnerable, dedicated and sometimes intense, but charming and playful. Planner of the reunion. (Wears a denim suit with print blouse, and flat canvas shoes--NO veil--in I-1; remove jacket for beach house scenes.) The others are all her former classmates--now ex-nuns.

Rosie, 38-40. An artist. Good-natured, excitable, up-beat, sloppy; enjoys life. Her speech rides a roller-coaster, with excessive vocal variation and undue emphasis. (Wears colorful, outrageous, artistic get-ups.)

Carol, 38-40. A music therapist. Fine singing voice; conventional Catholic; wholesome looking, but somewhat overweight; lives with Leslie. (Hair and clothing are conservative, modest, tasteful.)

Leslie, 38-40. A high school physical education teacher. Still an athlete but out of condition; not butch. Conservative; straightforward; lives with Carol. (Hair and clothing are casual, clean, neat, but without concern for fashion.)

Helene, 38-40. A writer. Attractive, sophisticated, theatrical, keyed-up; sense of humor; parodies her own pretentiousness. (Dresses fashionably, expensively.)

Maria, 38-40. A nurse. Traditional wife-and-mother. Sensitive, nurturing; more reserved than others. (Hair and clothing are conventional, unobtrusive, soft.)

SETTING

Prologue: convent motherhouse chapel, early 1960's.

The rest of the action takes place in the early 1980's, alternating between a beach house and the motherhouse (a garden bench or an office). The scenes at the beach house are in chronological order and take place over a summer weekend. Some of the scenes at the motherhouse between Joanna and Naomi are in this chronology; others are reenacted from Joanna's memory.

MUSIC NOTES

The Posuit Signum (Gregorian chant) is from the ceremony for the Profession of Vows. See <http://cantusdatabase.org/id/004346> The Dies Irae (Gregorian chant) from the Requiem Mass and the Salve Regina (Gregorian chant) from Compline can be found in most books of plainchant. The Jubilate Deo is a motet in two-part harmony, with music by Mozart. One version of it can be found in The Gregory Hymnal and Catholic Choir Book edited and arranged by Nicola A. Montani and published by The St. Gregory Guild, Philadelphia, copyright, 1947.

SCRIPT HISTORY

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Celebration Theatre, Los Angeles, CA, 1988
Theatre Gemini, Dallas, TX, 1988
Woman's Showcase Theatre, Fort Lauderdale, FL, 1987

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First Place, American Theatre Association Women's Program Playwriting Contest, 1983
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Finalist, At-The-Foot-Of-The-Mountain Festival, 1983
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Prologue

SETTING: *Motherhouse chapel.*

AT RISE: *Sound of women's voices singing Gregorian chant: Posuit Signam. A tight circle of light comes up on MOTHER NAOMI, in traditional habit, at edge of stage, facing out. As singing crescendos, she seems to be watching a procession approach. The singing stops.*

NAOMI

In the name of Jesus Christ, of our Holy Father the Pope, of His Excellency our Bishop, and of our Reverend Mother General of the Sisters of Our Lady of Good Hope, I accept your Holy Vows of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience.

(Becoming more personal.)

You sixty have been especially dear to me, my Daughters, in the two years you have been my novices. And as you are sent forth to do the Lord's work, I ask you to keep these two things in mind: Remember from whom you come; and remember to whom you go. It is from God you come and to God you belong. Be ever mindful of the words you have just sung: "He has placed his seal upon you that you may admit no other lover." And it is to God you go--to find Him in the poorest of his creatures. For those with the greatest need have the first right to help.

(Formal again.)

May the blessing of God go with you. Pray for me, Sisters, as I will for you.

(Personal again.)

And let us love one another always in the bonds of true sisterhood.

(Chant is resumed and sung softly as the light on NAOMI dims. As if performing a ritual, she takes off her traditional wimple, coif, and veil. She lets the long habit drop from her, revealing a short blue suit and white blouse underneath. She puts on a short veil to complete her modernized habit.)

ACT IScene 1

SETTING: *Motherhouse (garden or office).*

AT RISE: *Crossfade as NAOMI crosses to this area, and is joined by SISTER JOANNA. Though they are in the middle of a confrontation, they are genuinely fond of each other and never lose sight of that.*

NAOMI

Is it possible you *like*...being controversial?

JOANNA

You mean the publicity?

NAOMI

Dramatizing the situation, providing copy for sympathetic reporters, confronting bishops.

JOANNA

(Matter-of-factly.)

I'm not the first to confront a bishop.

NAOMI

You may be the first to enjoy it so much!

JOANNA

You think it's fun to be chastised like a school girl by the bishop?! You think I relish getting anonymous hate mail from my own sisters?! You think I enjoy...

(Beat. Softer.)

this.

NAOMI

This?

JOANNA

(Painfully.)

Your...disapproval.

NAOMI

I've always acknowledged your talents, Sister Joanna, and tried to give you enough...freedom to use them.

JOANNA

But now the tether's being shortened?

NAOMI

It doesn't have to be. Just take up a different cause.

JOANNA

(Pleading.)

Mother Naomi, I need to do this work.

NAOMI

Need?

JOANNA

I feel called to it—to speak out, to lay the groundwork for change.

NAOMI

To be the Voice in the Wilderness preparing the way? Why must you be the one?

JOANNA

Because no one else is doing it.

NAOMI

Do you have some special investment in this...because...you yourself are...?

JOANNA

That's not the reason.

NAOMI

Then what makes you so convinced of this calling?

JOANNA

My faith.

NAOMI

Are you sure it's not your pride?

JOANNA

Don't worry—I haven't seen any visions. But I have seen people in pain. And I've listened. And I know I have to help. That's all. You said not to expect fireworks. That God's will is revealed in simple ways.

NAOMI

Beware, Joanna. That's the ultimate temptation: seeing yourself as sole interpreter of God's will.

JOANNA

I'll just have to take that risk.

NAOMI

That always has been your specialty, hasn't it?

(Beat. Partly teasing.)

You should have joined the circus.

JOANNA

(Matching her tone.)

I thought I did.

NAOMI

The daring young nun on the flying trapeze.

JOANNA

Now who's dramatizing?

NAOMI
Listen to me—I can't be your safety net any longer.

JOANNA
Can't or won't?

NAOMI
(Softening.)
Joanna, I'm afraid for you.

JOANNA
Are you sure it's for me?
(Pause.)

NAOMI
The Provincial Council meetings start Friday.

JOANNA
Will you let me know?

NAOMI
Of course, Love.

JOANNA
I'm going to the beach house for the weekend.

NAOMI
Retreat?

JOANNA
Reunion.

NAOMI
Your class?

JOANNA
A few of them.
(Beat.)
It's been twenty years.

NAOMI
(Nostalgic.)
My first novices.

JOANNA
Want to come? You'd have a better time.

NAOMI
I'll know their decision by Saturday afternoon.

JOANNA
I'll come back then.
*(NAOMI exits. JOANNA crosses to beach house.
Crossfade with her.)*

Scene 2

SETTING: *Friday evening. A simple beach house with a sitting area (sofa, chairs, stereo) and a kitchen area. Stairs lead to a second floor. A door leads to a porch. There is a small beach area on another part of the stage.*

AT RISE: *JOANNA is cooking. ROSIE is on the floor, working on a large pastel drawing. Gregorian chant—women's voices as in the Prologue—is coming from the stereo.*

HELENE

(Calling from upstairs.)

Joanna! Give the Singing Nuns a break! You're going to wear that record out!

JOANNA

(Calling up to her.)

I'm tripping out on nostalgia.

HELENE

(From upstairs.)

How can anyone who reads Psychology Today be so medieval?

JOANNA

(Calling up to her, crossing to stereo.)

Listen, Helene—Gregorian Chant is probably the only thing that got those poor nuns through the Middle Ages.

(Wistfully, to ROSIE.)

It reminds me how simple it used to be. When we sang like that, only the music mattered. Sometimes I miss it.

(Turns music off.)

ROSIE

Me too! This was a great idea, Jo. What made you think of it?

JOANNA

I guess I just wanted to be with you all again. I miss you.

ROSIE

Aw...isn't that sweet!

JOANNA

How's the mistresspiece coming?

ROSIE

Chalk's not really my medium.

JOANNA

(Looking at drawing.)

I like it. It's very...colorful.

ROSIE

Gaudy. That's what the critics say. The three "g's"—glaring, garish, gaudy.

JOANNA

Just like God.

ROSIE

What?

JOANNA

Haven't they ever seen a jungle? Rosie, you're just divinely inspired!

ROSIE

Now I remember why I liked you, Joanna. How'd you like to be my agent?

JOANNA

(Crossing to kitchen.)

What do you think, Rosie—sit-down or buffet?

ROSIE

Let's see...

(Counting chairs.)

There's you and me and Helene. That's three. Carol and Leslie make five.

JOANNA

Six if Maria comes.

ROSIE

You think she'll show up?

JOANNA

She never actually said no. Just all this stuff about hospital duty and the kids' summer camp.

ROSIE

Maybe she's nervous.

JOANNA

She wouldn't be the only one.

ROSIE

You worry too much, Joanna. You ought to go into therapy. My therapist is *wonderful*. I'm just *crazy* about her. But it's all right—you're supposed to be in love with your therapist. It's called "crossference" or something. Anyway, what's there to worry about?

JOANNA

What if somebody's become a Republican? Or a Total Woman?

ROSIE

What if somebody still goes to church?

JOANNA

I still go to church.

ROSIE

It's good for your credibility.

JOANNA

It's just that I want us to still have something in common...I guess I want us to still be...sisters.

ROSIE

Relax, Joanna. Nobody's going to make a scene.

JOANNA

Maybe that's what I'm afraid of—it'll be so boring!

ROSIE

So run a psychodrama session.

JOANNA

Better yet—Chapter of Faults!

ROSIE

Wouldn't that be a *gas*! I vote buffet. It's more...dynamic.

JOANNA

Did you tell Carol and Leslie salad dressing?

ROSIE

And napkins. Isn't Leslie a great swimmer?

JOANNA

Leslie's great at everything athletic. Don't you remember?

ROSIE

I never saw her swim. In the old days we weren't allowed.

JOANNA

What do you think about those two?

ROSIE

What do you mean?

JOANNA

How long have they been living together?

ROSIE

Since they left. Why?

JOANNA

Just wondering. How can you tell if spaghetti's done?

ROSIE

Throw a piece against the wall; if it sticks, it's done.

Are you sure?
JOANNA

Is the Pope Italian?
ROSIE

No.
JOANNA

Well, I am! Take it from Mamma Rosa.
ROSIE

Does it matter which kind of wall? Painted, paneled, papered, brick—they all work?
JOANNA

(LESLIE and CAROL enter onto porch. LESLIE carries a case of beer which she starts to unload into a cooler on the porch. CAROL comes into the house with a bag of groceries.)

Smells great in here—who's on cooking?
CAROL

We're having off-the-wall spaghetti.
JOANNA
(Raising her hand.)

Drum roll, everybody—here it is! Da-da-da, dat, da-da!
ROSIE
(She holds up the drawing. It is the motherhouse, with a domed tower, flanked by wings, enclosing courtyards. Off to one side is an apple orchard.)
So what do you think?

Makes me homesick.
JOANNA

It's beautiful! I mean it's so realistic! Did you do it from memory?
CAROL

No, Carol, I copied from a postcard! Of course, I remember every inch of the motherhouse! Don't you? Come on—help me hang it.
ROSIE
(ROSIE AND CAROL hang the drawing.)

Hey, Rosie—do me a favor and put blossoms on the apple trees, would you? Lots of little pink blossoms.
JOANNA

Aren't apple blossoms white?
ROSIE

JOANNA
Biology was never my forte.

ROSIE
Is that why you're still celibate?

JOANNA
Someone has to atone for all that S.E.X. out there.

ROSIE
You're a regular saint! You and Agnes.

CAROL
And Lucy!

ROSIE
And Maria Goretti!

CAROL
(Chanting with quick pace and mock seriousness.)
Sanc - ta Jo - an - na

CAROL & ROSIE
(Chanting quickly.)
O - ra pro no - bis

CAROL
(Chanting quickly.)
Om - nes sanc - tae Vir - gi - nes

CAROL & ROSIE
(Chanting quickly.)
O - ra - te pro no - bis

JOANNA
(Mock pronouncement.)
The virgin martyrs are the jewels in the crown of the Church.

ROSIE
Translation: Better a dead woman than a sexy one.

JOANNA
Now that you two are warmed up, let's celebrate the "unveiling" with a song! How about it, Carol?

CAROL
The Choir Director is taking requests.

ROSIE
How about "*Laetentur Coeli*"?

CAROL
That's Christmas. What we need is...a motet for festivals. How about "*Jubilate Deo*"?

JOANNA

Hit it, Sister!

(CAROL hums the starting notes. They break into harmony, CAROL conducting with exaggeration.)

ALL

(Singing.)

Jubilate Deo omnis terra,
 Servite Domino
 in laetitia
 in laetitia...

(They all take a deep breath, get ready to start the next part, but all have forgotten what comes next. They break into laughter ROSIE throws an arm around CAROL.)

ROSIE

We were counting on *you*, Choir Director!

CAROL

I thought *you* all would remember!

JOANNA

It's been so long!

CAROL

All right, Sisters—rehearsal before morning prayer!

JOANNA

Where's Leslie?

CAROL

Icing down the beer.

LESLIE

(From porch.)

Don't talk about me—I can hear you!

CAROL

(Calling out to her.)

We're not that desperate!

JOANNA

How about a drink before dinner? White wine or red?

CAROL

White, thanks.

ROSIE

I'll take red.

JOANNA

What about Leslie?

CAROL

She'll drink beer.

LESLIE

(From porch, simultaneously with CAROL's line.)

I'll drink beer.

(LESLIE enters, drinking beer, sees the drawing, moves around the room pretending to be criticizing it from different angles.)

Perfect. But you forgot the tennis courts, Rosie. How come you didn't get her on that, Carol?

ROSIE

Do you suppose Artemesia Gentileschi had to deal with this?

LESLIE & CAROL

Who?

ROSIE

(Exiting, disgusted.)

I'll get the chalks.

JOANNA

(Unpacking groceries.)

Salad dressing...napkins...what's this starch for?

LESLIE

Helene.

JOANNA

What are you up to, Leslie?

LESLIE

Don't you remember Helene in the Novitiate? How she was about not having a wrinkle in her guimpe?

JOANNA

So what are you going to starch?

LESLIE

I don't know yet. Where is she anyway?

JOANNA

Putting on her designer mascara.

CAROL

(Calls up steps.)

Helene!

HELENE

(Upstairs.)

Be down in a minute!

CAROL

(To others, mockingly.)

She'll be down in a minute.

(Calling up.)

Want a drink?

HELENE

(Upstairs.)

Got any scotch?

CAROL

(To JOANNA.)

Do we have any scotch?

(JOANNA shakes head "No.")

CAROL

(Calling up.)

White wine or red?

HELENE

(Upstairs.)

Are we having a party or a mass?

CAROL

(To JOANNA.)

Is this a party or a mass?

JOANNA

Tell her it's a cheap party.

CAROL

(Calling up.)

We're having a cheap party. Want to come?

LESLIE

(Calling up.)

Helene—I got some cold beer if you'd rather have that.

HELENE

(Upstairs.)

No thanks—I'll leave the beer bellies to you jocks.

LESLIE

(Calling up.)

Stifle it!

JOANNA

Leslie, what's going on with you and Helene? She's been needling you all day.

LESLIE

Just teasing.

ROSIE

(Returning with chalks.)

O.K., spring is about to arrive at the motherhouse.

(Starts putting apple blossoms on the trees.)

LESLIE

And the tennis courts!

ROSIE

Yeah, yeah.

(HELENE descends. CAROL sings: "Here she comes-- Sister America!" Others pick it up. HELENE plays to them, doing turns on the runway. Cheers, whistles. When noise subsides, HELENE notices drawing.)

HELENE

Ah! How phallic.

ROSIE

What!

HELENE

The rising tower.

ROSIE

This is a *dome*, Dummy! Domes are *female* symbols. Don't you know *anything* about art?!

HELENE

I know a lot about rising towers.

JOANNA

This is better than a Rorschach test.

ROSIE

Then how come you're so horny?

HELENE

Me?—horny?

ROSIE

(To others, but played to get a rise out of HELENE.)

You all thought we were late getting here this morning because of me. But for once I was on time. It was Helene's fault. When I stopped for her, she was upstairs pretending to be dressing. But really she was having one last screw with Neil.

HELENE

Rosalie! How can you say that!?

ROSIE

Because I *heard* you!

HELENE

You were supposed to be putting my stuff in the car.

ROSIE

(Laughing.)

Shit, Helene—even a quickie takes longer than that.

HELENE

"And the two shall be one flesh." It says so in the Bible.

ROSIE

That's for *married* people, Helene. Not for you and Neil.

HELENE

Oh God—why did I say I would come to this reunion?

ROSIE

Because you wanted to *share*. Don't you remember? We talked about it in the car. How we really needed this long weekend of Deep Meaningful Sharing with people who really *cared* about us.

HELENE

You need it. I came for the suntan.

JOANNA

Since the sun has just set, would you settle for dinner?
(Hurls a string of spaghetti against the wall.)

HELENE

What are you doing?!

JOANNA

It's not sticking yet. We'll have to have Chapter of Faults.

HELENE & CAROL & LESLIE

What?

JOANNA

Just like old times in the refectory.

HELENE

I couldn't possibly. I don't have any faults.

LESLIE

We'll help you remember.

CAROL

This is sick. I mean this is really sick.

ROSIE

Come on, Carol—be a sport.

CAROL

God'll punish us for this.

JOANNA

All right, Sisters.

(Claps her hands softly.)

We'll line up here..hands in sleeves...

(They line up, facing audience.)

Eyes mortified.

(They cast their eyes down.)

ROSIE

That's what took all the fun out of it!

JOANNA

Sister Rosalie!

(Puts a finger to her lips.)

Sister Leslie will go first.

LESLIE

She will!?

(HELENE pushes LESLIE onto her knees.)

All right, all right.

(Clears her throat, extends her arms out to the sides and starts to say something, but ROSIE gives a snort of laughter. LESLIE shoots her a dark look, composes herself again, and recites formally.)

I Sister Leslie humbly acknowledge that I lost my temper.

CAROL

What she really means is that she threw a tantrum on the tennis court and smashed her racket.

JOANNA

Whose racket?

ALL

Our racket!

LESLIE

I Sister Leslie humbly acknowledge that I broke *our* racket when I lost *our* temper.

(LESLIE gets up. CAROL kneels.)

CAROL

I Sister Carol humbly acknowledge that I broke the Grand Silence...

(Everyone gasps.)

...by humming after night prayer.

JOANNA

What did you hum, Sister?

CAROL

"Wake up, Little Suzie."

(ALL "tsk, tsk" as CAROL gets up and HELENE kneels.)

HELENE

I Sister Helene...humbly acknowledge...that I was vain about my appearance.

LESLIE

Is that the best you can do?

CAROL

Don't tell us you've lost your flair for the dramatic.

JOANNA

(Acting it out.)

Who hid behind the statue of the Virgin and terrified Sister Pius with an apparition?

(HELENE squeals with delight at the memory; others break up.)

HELENE

I did!

JOANNA

Who put the rooster in the men's room when the Cardinal came to visit?

HELENE

That was Sister Prudence=s idea!

JOANNA

Who did it?!

HELENE

(Squeals.)

I did!

JOANNA

Who put old Sister Immaculata's mop in her coffin with her?

ALL

What?

HELENE

How did you know that?

JOANNA

I was there.

HELENE

But I was last on wake duty the night before the funeral.

JOANNA

And I was next to last.

HELENE

You spied on me?

JOANNA

Mopping the corridor at midnight—I knew you were up to something!

HELENE

And you didn't tell?

JOANNA

She would have been eternally miserable without it.

HELENE

I humbly acknowledge that I underestimated Sister Joanna.
(Resumes her place in line, as ROSIE kneels.)

ROSIE

I Sister Rosalie humbly acknowledge that I ate between meals...I was late for choir...

CAROL

Very late.

ROSIE

I did not get up when the rising bell rang. I broke a dish. I used an object for a purpose other than that for which it was intended.

HELENE

What?

ROSIE

(Breaking out of character.)
 Don't you remember that one? It was my favorite. "I used an object for a purpose other than that for which it was intended."

JOANNA

What object was that, Sister?

ROSIE

My finger!

(Back in character, reciting.)

I humbly acknowledge that I used my finger for—

JOANNA

That will do, Sister. Too much contrition is a fault.

ROSIE

But didn't you just hate how superficial it was? We didn't dare tell our real sins.

JOANNA

It wasn't allowed. That would have given the rest of us ideas.

ROSIE

But weren't you all just dying for someone to admit something horrible and human?

JOANNA

Let's try it.

JOANNA (*Cont.*)

(Kneels and recites.)

I Sister Joanna humbly acknowledge that I nurtured lurid, lustful fantasies about fornicating with—

(There is a knock at the door. ALL look towards it.)

MARIA

(From porch.)

Is this the Good Hope Retreat Center for the hopeless?

JOANNA

Maria!

(MARIA enters. OTHERS run to her, squealing greetings and giving her hugs—except for JOANNA, who sits back on her heels, smiling. The following are machine-gunned at MARIA.)

CAROL

Where've you been?

LESLIE

We didn't know you were coming!

HELENE

You look terrific!

ROSIE

You didn't get lost, did you? Are you OK?

MARIA

(Pointing to each as she answers their questions in reverse order.)

Yes, I'm O.K. No, I didn't get lost. Thanks, you look terrific too. I didn't know I was coming either. And...

(Finding the right questioner.)

I've been at the hospital all day. Whew!

CAROL

Are you sick?

MARIA

No, I'm a nurse.

(They laugh.)

HELENE

Come on in—you're just in time for Chapter of Faults.

(The huddle around the door opens up; MARIA and JOANNA look at each other.)

JOANNA

Hello, Ria.

MARIA
You haven't changed, Joanna.

JOANNA
Are you disappointed?

MARIA
No. I'm not disappointed.
(JOANNA gets up and they embrace tentatively.)

ROSIE
Joanna was just going to humbly acknowledge who she fantasized fornicating with back in the convent.

MARIA
Well! Don't let me interrupt.

JOANNA
It'll have to wait now. The readiness is all. How about a drink instead?
(Goes for wine.)

HELENE
(Raising her glass.)
Joanna is about to celebrate mass.

JOANNA
Oh—the spaghetti!

ROSIE
I'll get it.

LESLIE
So are we all here, Joanna? Or do you have more surprises in store?

JOANNA
This is it.

LESLIE
Why only six out of sixty?

HELENE
The top ten percent!

CAROL
Quality over quantity.

JOANNA
That's it, in fact. Big groups tend to be...well, you know...inhibiting. And I wanted...I don't know really...

HELENE & ROSIE
Deep Meaningful Sharing!

LESLIE
But how did you pick us?

JOANNA
Maybe I liked you best.

LESLIE
Come on!

JOANNA
It's true. There was something special about each of you that I...admired.

LESLIE
That might be true for the others. But why me? You were just being polite because I live with Carol.

JOANNA
I've always liked you, Leslie. I think it's because you were always so...so clean.
(Others guffaw.)

LESLIE
(Embarrassed.)
If you'd been assigned to scrubbing showers instead of shelving books, you'd've been clean too.

JOANNA
That's not what I mean. You're...wholesome—whole. There are no loose ends about you. You're a seamless garment. No frills. No secret compartments.

LESLIE
(Surprised.)
And you like that?

JOANNA
It's honest.

LESLIE
(Touched.)
Gosh. I don't know what to say.

JOANNA
(Approaching MARIA with wine glass.)
Anyway, of all the people in our class, you all mattered most to me.

MARIA
Not very charitable of you, Sister. You know what St. Paul says—no favorites. "All to all."

JOANNA
(Touching MARIA.)
And a little more to some.

ROSIE

(Pretending to be ringing a bell.)

Ding-a-ling-a-ling-a-ling.

JOANNA

(Assuming a "Superior's" tone.)

Sisters—since our reunion is a major feast, I am suspending the rule of silence for this meal.

(OTHERS respond with mock excitement, and, during the following dialogue, serve themselves and eat.)

MARIA

Rosie—Joanna told me on the phone you had a little boy.

(Gesturing to drawing.)

Is he an artistic prodigy?

ROSIE

Impressionistic finger painting at three.

JOANNA

Imagine the mess!

ROSIE

And now Stephen wants another one—at my age!

CAROL

What do you mean? We're not forty yet?

ROSIE

Easy for you to say, Carol. You don't have kids.

CAROL

(Wishing she did.)

Right.

(Crosses to table.)

ROSIE

Shit. I'm running off at the mouth already.

HELENE

So! Who's dating anybody? Let's get all the good dirt.

JOANNA

Helene, ever think of taking sensitivity training?

HELENE

Come on—raise hands, everybody who did the singles-bar scene after you left?

(ALL but JOANNA raise hands. They laugh. Pointing to JOANNA.)

Joanna—you don't know how lucky you are!

JOANNA

So tell me!

ROSIE

It sort of made you feel like you were in an "X" movie.

CAROL

Is that where you met your husband, Rosie?

ROSIE

Are you kidding? I met Stephen in church—he's an ex-priest.

HELENE

Everybody says they make the worst husbands.

CAROL

Helene, you're obnoxious.

HELENE

Ah-ha! Got your eye on the local curate, do you, Carol? Does she, Leslie?

LESLIE

Not that I know of.

MARIA

Where are you working now, Carol?

CAROL

I'm a music therapist for retarded children.

ROSIE

Isn't that *perfect*?

LESLIE

The kids are crazy about her.

(Looks teasingly at CAROL.)

The staff too—eh, Carol?

CAROL

(Shyly.)

I dated my supervisor for a while.

HELENE

What happened?

CAROL

Well, I liked him...but...

HELENE

But what?

CAROL

Well, he liked me more than I liked him.

HELENE

You mean you wouldn't put out.

JOANNA

Helene.

CAROL

Maybe I'm just old-fashioned.

LESLIE

I don't see anything wrong with that. You're your own person with your own standards.

MARIA

Do you still teach Phys Ed. at Marian High, Leslie?

(LESLIE nods.)

CAROL

She's chairman of the department now.

ROSIE

Please! "Chairperson."

CAROL

Rosie—don't tell me you're a women's libber?

ROSIE

Well, of course I'm a feminist. Aren't we all?

HELENE & CAROL & LESLIE

No!

HELENE

(Raising her glass in a toast.)

"Let wives be subject to their husbands."

ROSIE

You can tell she doesn't have a husband.

JOANNA

(To ROSIE.)

I warned you there'd be a Total Woman in the crowd.

(To HELENE.)

Where did you meet Neil, Helene?

HELENE

He was my editor at The Saturday Review. What a hunk!

JOANNA

Do you still work for The Review?

HELENE

After we started living together, Neil became a foreign correspondent for AP. I'm sure you've read some of his stuff. He's won awards. We travel a lot.

JOANNA
So you've become a camp follower.

HELENE
(Archly.)
I'm a free-lance writer.

JOANNA
(Toasting.)
And the two shall become one career.

MARIA
How about you, Rosie?

ROSIE
I thought I'd never get my turn!

CAROL
Now we're in for it.

ROSIE
I'm into life-study photography. And I'm in a *very* productive cycle. It's *so* exciting. I just had a showing in the Village.

LESLIE
The village?

ROSIE
You know—Greenwich Village. I have a friend with a gallery there. And I've changed my name. To "Vita." Isn't it wonderful? It means "Life."

HELENE
Isn't that a scream?!

CAROL
Vita what?

ROSIE
Just "Vita."

MARIA
Officially? I mean legally?

ROSIE
Of course.

JOANNA
So what do you take pictures of?

ROSIE
Mostly I've done spiderwebs.

CAROL

Spiderwebs? Is that it? Anything else in the pictures?

ROSIE

Sometimes a spider.

(Beat.)

But this last show was different. Really very exciting. I feel I've come into my own. It's what I was *called* to photograph.

CAROL

What?

ROSIE

Old women.

CAROL

Well, that's really a sweet i--

ROSIE

Naked old women.

CAROL

--dea.

ROSIE

They're beautiful. Lovely, sagging breasts and drooping buttocks. Protruding veins. So many lines and wrinkles—gorgeous textures.

JOANNA

(Genuinely appreciative.)

Nice.

ROSIE

But the best is yet to come.

LESLIE

(Sarcastic.)

I'll bet.

ROSIE

I'm working on a way to superimpose the spiderwebs on the naked old women.

LESLIE

(Sarcastic.)

Dynamite.

ROSIE

It means developing new techniques. I'm stretching and growing. It feels so good.

HELENE

When are you going to do dirty old men?

ROSIE

Helene—you're disgusting!

JOANNA

You should let us know when you have another show, Rosie. I'd love to see your work.

MARIA

What about you, Joanna? You're the only one of us who hasn't left.

HELENE

Still teaching new-wave psychology?

JOANNA

No, I'm not teaching anymore.

LESLIE

Why not? You're a born teacher. Got me through philosophy.

MARIA

And me through French.

CAROL

And me through math.

HELENE

Has the community tutor retired?

JOANNA

I do social justice work now.

CAROL

You mean like protesting nuclear missiles or picketing for migrant workers.

JOANNA

Well, I do work with minorities...sexual minorities.

(Beat.)

I'm in gay and lesbian ministry.

(Pause.)

HELENE

You mean you counsel queers!?! What are you doing—bucking for canonization along with Damien the Leper?

JOANNA

No, I don't counsel queers. I listen to people whose problems are caused by other people calling them queer.

ROSIE

My God, Joanna, that's wonderful! I can't believe it!

HELENE

Admit it, Joanna—you're a closet case yourself, aren't you?

MARIA

Helene—it's none of your business!

HELENE

(Pressing JOANNA.)

Aren't you?

CAROL

A person doesn't have to be—

HELENE

(Pressing harder.)

Aren't you?

JOANNA

(Beat.)

Yes, I am a lesbian.

(Pause.)

What does it matter so long as I'm celibate?

(Pause.)

HELENE

Think of it—we spent our most impressionable years kneeling in the same pew with Sister Dyke! O, Sweet Jesus, please don't let it be contagious!

ROSIE

Helene—stop it!

MARIA

Is that how you got into the work, Joanna?

JOANNA

So many gays and lesbians are leaving the Church because they feel...rejected...because it's not a place where they can be themselves. I want to help.

CAROL

But isn't there a reason for the Church's teaching? I mean doesn't the Bible say—

JOANNA

The Church's teaching could change.

LESLIE

But doesn't it seem...well, unnatural? I mean what about those men you read about in the paper—the ones that go after little boys?

JOANNA

They're not homosexuals—they're pederasts.

HELENE

I thought a pederast was somebody with a foot fetish.

ROSIE

Joanna, this is so *exciting!* I mean it's so *good* that you're doing this. You're such a good

ROSIE (*Cont.*)

person! It's too good to be true! I mean I just can't believe they're letting you *do* this. What does the order say?

JOANNA

Mostly they try not to notice me except when they have to.

MARIA

When's that?

JOANNA

When the paper does a story.

(JOANNA crosses to another part of stage. Crossfade with her.)

Scene 3

SETTING: *Motherhouse.*

AT RISE: *JOANNA crosses to Motherhouse. Lights come up on NAOMI, waving a newspaper.*

NAOMI
How could you say this about the bishop?

JOANNA
How could I not?

NAOMI
By considering the consequences.

JOANNA
If this bill doesn't pass, the consequences for gays and lesbians will be—

NAOMI
You know that's not what I'm talking about.

JOANNA
But that's what needs talking about.

NAOMI
What did you think would happen when you said this?

JOANNA
Everybody would know.

NAOMI
What everybody knows is that an upstart nun is trying to shame her bishop.

JOANNA
It didn't work. He's shameless.

NAOMI
The man is head of the Church in this diocese and as such commands our respect.

JOANNA
"Commanding" respect is not the best way to get it.

NAOMI
And what about your methods? Testifying publicly before the City Council—

JOANNA
I'm a citizen and a voter, and have a right to—

NAOMI
--on the very day the bishop's letter of opposition is read.

JOANNA

I didn't know I was scheduled for—

NAOMI

You even wore your veil! Just to get more attention!

JOANNA

Isn't that what it's for?

NAOMI

You *use* the Church.

JOANNA

The bishop's using it too.

NAOMI

But you also need the Church—and the convent. Without them you'd be just plain Joanna Jordan. No one would care what you said. Remember that!

*(NAOMI exits. JOANNA returns to beach house.
Crossfade with her.)*

Scene 4

SETTING: *Beach house. As in Scene 2.*

LESLIE

What did you say about the bishop?

JOANNA

That he was an irresponsibly myopic heterosexist.

ROSIE

(Laughing.)

Oh my God! Joanna, you didn't! You're too much! You'll end up excommunicated!

HELENE

Excommunicated, hell! She'll end up exterminated! Barbecued for the pleasure of ecclesiastical cannibals. Like Joan of Arc—going up in a blaze of...faggots!

MARIA

Helene, your sense of humor is perverted.

HELENE

We'll see who's perverted! This is no laughing matter! Remember Peter Abelard!

JOANNA

I do!

HELENE

Remember Galileo!

JOANNA

I do!

HELENE

Remember What=s-his-face the Vatican just put the screws on.

JOANNA

Hans Kung!

HELENE

The Inquisition lives!

(Threatening JOANNA.)

And you've got to be ready for it, Sister, for you know neither the day nor the hour.... Have your lamp burning.

JOANNA

I have!

HELENE

Be a wise and prudent virgin.

JOANNA

I am!

HELENE

(Turning out the lights.)

For on just such a dark and moonlit night as this, the Grand Inquisitor will come for you—

(Picks up a dark beach towel from back of sofa and throws it around herself.)

cloaked in clerical righteousness--

(Grabs a broom from the corner, turns it bristles up.)

armed with the crosier of oppressive authority, and accompanied by the mournful, foreboding strains of the "Dies Irae."

(To CAROL.)

Accompaniment, please!

CAROL

It's sacrilegious!

JOANNA

Oh, go ahead—humor her. I may need the rehearsal.

(CAROL starts to chant the "Dies Irae.")

HELENE

(Banging "crosier" on floor.)

Sister Joanna Jordan, you are summoned before this Court of Inquisition to render an account of your...fairy heresies. Kneel in the presence of the Big Stick!

(She pounds the floor. JOANNA kneels.)

Did you or did you not defame the duly anointed, newly appointed shepherd of your flock—

JOANNA

(Bleating.)

Baaaaa!

HELENE

—by making crass allusion to His Excellency's sacerdotal short-sightedness? Wicked, articulate Woman, are you guilty?

JOANNA

Of truth-telling, Your Lordship.

HELENE

Did you or did you not refer to His Reverence's visionary deficiencies?

JOANNA

I did.

HELENE

(Calling off stage.)

Light the fire!

(Warming up to it.)

Now we must tenderize the meat. Tell me true, my Daughter, have you fallen among the perverts? Do you socialize with sodomites?

JOANNA

Yes, Your Lordship, but most of them are straight.

HELENE

Liar! Who in this Holy Court has committed sodomy?

(ROSIE raises her hand sheepishly. HELENE calls off stage.)

Put this Vita woman on the docket next!

(To JOANNA.)

Enough equivocating. You stand accused of fraternizing with fags, hanging out with hand-holding, hairdressing homos. How do you plead?

JOANNA

Guilty of brotherly love. I can't help myself, Your Lordship. I'm a closet Christian.

HELENE

Ah-ha! I see the flames mounting! But now we must bind you to the stake. Confess, O fallen female, have you ever had dinner with a dyke? Breakfast with a butch? Ever take a lezzie out to lunch? Do you cavort with camp counselors, lady wrestlers, racket-wielding, roller-skating, leather-jacketed jockettes?! Speak up!

JOANNA

They are my sisters.

HELENE

Heretic! You are a charred stick, a heap of ashes!

(Pounds stick.)

JOANNA

Wait! Before you pass sentence in the name of the Holy Inquisition, maybe there are witnesses for my defense.

HELENE

(Walks among others, poking each with her stick.)

Well? Any more...confessions of sisterly love?

(CAROL stops humming.)

Are you all cowards then? Is there none will come forward and acknowledge this woman?

(Bends down to LESLIE.)

Listen, my Sweet—do you hear a cock crowing?

(LESLIE tenses, looks uncomfortably at CAROL.)

Is there not another half-witted masochist among you who longs for the singeing of her flesh?

Come on, Girls!

(Going limp-wristed and singing.)

'Tis the season to be fairy, fa,la,la,la,la,la,la,la,la.

Don we now our gay apparel, fa,la,la,la,la,la--

(Breaking off, to CAROL.)

What's become of the accompaniment?

CAROL

(Uncomfortable.)

I only do plainchant.

HELENE

How monotonous. Nothing *gayer* than that? Where's your spirit of adventure?

LESLIE

(Standing.)

Leave her alone.

HELENE

(Turning on LESLIE.)

And how about you, Olympian of Old? Are you secretly the amazing Amazon of all our dreams?

LESLIE

That's enough—stop it!

HELENE

Do you ever flex your flabby muscles at your adoring tennis partner?

LESLIE

Shut up, Helene—the play's over!

HELENE

(Caressing LESLIE's hair.)

Ever fantasize pulling her sweet, sweating body onto yours?
(LESLIE, lunging at HELENE to put a hand over her mouth, knocks her onto the sofa. CAROL and JOANNA try to restrain her.)

CAROL

Leslie—no! Leave her alone!

MARIA

She's just goading you, Leslie—she doesn't mean it!

(But LESLIE is stronger. She pins HELENE down and wrestles to grab both wrists.)

HELENE

(Screams.)

Don't touch me! Don't touch me!

(LESLIE, suddenly disarmed by HELENE's urgency and embarrassed by her own recourse to violence, gets off, and crosses to turn the lights up. ROSIE and MARIA help HELENE into a sitting position. HELENE cries onto MARIA who rocks her gently.)

MARIA

What is it, Helene?

(No response.)

Let it out.

(Pause.)

JOANNA
 Maybe we can help.

HELENE
(Sobbing.)
 I...it's not...I...I'm pregnant.
(Pause.)

CAROL
 Do you want the baby?

HELENE
 Yes. But Neil doesn't.
(Beat.)
 And I want Neil.

ROSIE
 Oh, Helene—how awful!
(Pause.)

JOANNA
 You must feel miserable. I'm sorry—
(Pause.)

HELENE
 No! *I'm* sorry.
(Beat.)
 Leslie, I'm sorry.

LESLIE
 Why me, Helene?

HELENE
 Because you...for a moment you reminded me of somebody...

LESLIE
 Who?
(HELENE shakes her head.)

JOANNA
 It might help to tell it, Helene.

HELENE
(Takes a deep breath.)
 When I first left the convent, I met a woman at grad school. Dana. She was an athlete—strong...stunning. People would stare at her on the street. We both loved being crazy. She got me to do...wild things—sky diving, mountain climbing...We talked for hours, drinking beer, laughing, singing...dancing.

(Beat.)
 Finally we became lovers. But I think I always knew it would be temporary. I couldn't have told my parents, other friends, people at work. I couldn't live like that—afraid of being discovered... disapproved of. So I dated men all the while. She didn't. It was very painful for her. We argued.

(Pause.)

LESLIE

What happened?

HELENE

She died in a car crash.

(Pause.)

Then I met Neil and we lived happily ever after.

(Beat.)

Till Baby makes three.

ROSIE

Helene, what are you going to do?

HELENE

(Getting up.)

I'm going to retire the Grand Inquisitor.

(Puts broom back in corner and folds beach towel.)

I only hope, Sister Joanna, that he did you some good.

JOANNA

Helene—would you like to...to talk?

ROSIE

Why don't you? It might help. We all want to help.

HELENE

I know that. I do know that.

(Starts collecting empty paper plates.)

JOANNA

Then let us.

HELENE

I'm just so tired. So very tired. I want to sleep.

JOANNA

Go ahead, then. I'll clean up.

MARIA

I'll help.

JOANNA

You must be tired too, after a full day's work.

MARIA

A little.

JOANNA

I'm afraid you're stuck with sharing the sofa bed with me.

MARIA

Is that my penance for being late?

CAROL

Tomorrow night you two can take the front bedroom and Leslie and I'll sleep down here.

MARIA

I was only teasing.

JOANNA

Would anyone like some tea or anything?

HELENE

I'd like something.

JOANNA

What?

HELENE

I'd like to sing. The "Salve Regina" like we always used to at the end of night prayer.

JOANNA

Carol, do you remember the little speech you used to give us about singing the chant?

CAROL

You still remember that?

JOANNA

It always touched me. Tell us again.

CAROL

We must all try to sing as one voice. The beauty of the chant is the unity of many voices in the single melody.

(CAROL intones the "Salve Regina." The others join in. When the singing ends, CAROL, LESLIE, HELENE, and ROSIE exit upstairs, turning off some lights. CAROL can still be heard humming the hymn. MARIA gathers up glasses and puts away food. JOANNA unfolds sofa bed, gets sheets. They make up bed.)

JOANNA

I was afraid you wouldn't come.

MARIA

So was I.

JOANNA

You seemed...reluctant when I called.

MARIA

I wasn't...expecting it.
(Beat.)

JOANNA

Running off at noon recreation to lie on our backs in the tall grass under the apple blossoms...

MARIA

And read poetry to each other.

JOANNA

Only the most spiritual poetry, of course: Teresa of Avila...John Donne...Dante...

MARIA

Solomon.

JOANNA

Ah, yes—the Song of Songs.

MARIA

"Comfort me with apples, for I am faint with love..."

JOANNA

"Under the apple tree I awakened you..."

MARIA

"You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride..."

JOANNA

"A garden enclosed is my sister, my bride, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed..."

MARIA

"Set me as a seal upon your heart..."

(Beat.)

JOANNA

I loved you, Ria. I mean I was in love with you. I know that now.

MARIA

I was in love with you and I knew it then.

JOANNA

You were more perceptive.

MARIA

Or more realistic.

(Pause.)

JOANNA

Why did you get married? And so soon after you left?

MARIA

I was lucky to meet Peter then. It would have been such a mistake to marry anyone else. And I think I would have.

JOANNA

Married anyone?

MARIA

After the Novitiate, when we were sent on our separate assignments, I grieved for you. I felt the loss of you so much more than you felt the loss of me.

JOANNA

It wasn't that I—

MARIA

(Interrupting.)

You let go of me.

JOANNA

I wish we had been allowed to write or visit. But in those days the Rule was so strict. And no one thought of breaking it.

MARIA

I thought of it all the time.

JOANNA

But you didn't—break the Rule, I mean.

MARIA

Not that one.

JOANNA

Anyway, it probably would have made it just more frustrating.

MARIA

I mourned for you like you had died. For a year. Two years. When we all went back to the motherhouse for our renewal summer, you treated me like...like an old acquaintance that you had once been fond of. Told me all about your classes and your students. And about Sister Sarah who had been so helpful to you.

JOANNA

I wanted us to be friends again.

MARIA

Again? Yes. And you worked so hard at it. That's what gave you away.

JOANNA

I wish you had been sent someplace else. St. Justin's wasn't good for you.

MARIA

That fall, one of the nuns in my convent became very solicitous. She came to my room after night prayer a few times—said she heard me crying and wondered if I needed anything. One night she asked if she could stay...and I let her.

(Beat.)

JOANNA
Did you...did you feel guilty?

MARIA
Yes. But not about breaking the Rule.

JOANNA
What then?

MARIA
About being unfaithful to you. You see, I let myself pretend it was you.

(Beat.)

JOANNA
Is that what you do with Peter?

MARIA
No. Never.

JOANNA
Did you love her?

MARIA
You are the only woman I have ever loved. I've loved you for twenty years. It's been like an open sore that won't scab over because I can't stop picking at it.

(Beat. JOANNA sits on steps.)

JOANNA
Do you love Peter?

MARIA
I've come to love him very much. And I...appreciate him. He's a good husband and father.

JOANNA
Did you ever tell him about...the other?

MARIA
No. But I think he suspects there was...something...

JOANNA
What would happen if he knew?

MARIA
I don't think I want to find out.

JOANNA
Why did you marry him?

MARIA
We both wanted the same things out of life.

JOANNA

What did you want?

MARIA

(Pause. Then sits next to JOANNA.)

I wanted to be respected for what I could give others. I wanted a home, and children, and—

JOANNA

(Turns and looks at her.)

And me.

MARIA

(Trying to tease her way out.)

Nobody gets everything they want.

JOANNA

Do you want me now?

MARIA

I've never been unfaithful to Peter.

JOANNA

Do you want me now?

MARIA

I'm not sure I could live with myself.

JOANNA

Do you want me now.

MARIA

Yes!

(Beat, then turning away.)

No!

(Jumping up.)

I'll tell you what I want—I want to wring your neck! Twenty years later—when it suits you—you come waltzing back into my life! Unleashing old feelings and...unfolding old memories as...as carelessly as you do a sofa bed! It's some kind of game for you, isn't it?—this reunion. Well, I've been thinking about it for years—wondering what I'd do if I ever saw you again.

JOANNA

I didn't mean to be careless.

MARIA

You have a special talent for it!

(Pause.)

Once when the kids were little and I was feeding them breakfast, the TV was on—some women's talk show. Suddenly—there you were, being interviewed. About some book you had written. I hurled the cereal bowl at the set and screamed till I cried. The children sat there stunned. And I thought: well, now I've finally got her out of my system. Then three years later, the Post carried that feature with your picture. When I saw you smiling distantly—carelessly—out at me, my heart sank, and I knew it wasn't over. I burned the

MARIA (*Cont.*)
paper. I wanted to see your face go up in flames.

(Pause.)

JOANNA
(Gets up.)
Ria, I'm sorry...I'm so sorry.

MARIA
For what?

JOANNA
For letting go of you.

(JOANNA extends her arms. After a beat, MARIA slides into her embrace.)

MARIA
Why did you wait so long?

JOANNA
I don't know.

MARIA
And what do you want from me now?

JOANNA
I'm not sure. I...maybe I need your forgiveness.

(Lights fade as ocean sounds come up.)

(End of Act I)

ACT IIScene 1

SETTING: *Saturday afternoon. Beach house.*

AT RISE: *JOANNA, MARIA, LESLIE, HELENE, CAROL, and ROSIE in bathing suits and beach cover-ups, are energetically singing "Jubilate Deo." CAROL playfully conducts. This time they do make it through, finishing with a flourish and applauding themselves.*

HELENE

The music, the ceremonies, the rituals—I think that's what I miss the most.

JOANNA

I know what you mean, Helene. There was something special about doing everything exactly together. Having the same rhythms. Something almost...mystical.

HELENE

Magical.

CAROL

I never felt closer to all of you than when we were singing.

ROSIE

That's because you were most alive then, Carol. Really! I could see it in your eyes. Something inside you was... unleashed. I remember being in choir one day when it happened. It was scary—kind of like an exorcism—only instead of devils, something good escaped. Some kind of power like...like a deep tone, all pure and holy...leaping out of you. I looked up, half expecting to see angels on the ceiling. But then all of a sudden, I felt the power in *me*—like a throbbing in my stomach.

CAROL

I felt it too—that power.

ROSIE

You were looking at me. We were somehow connected—singing in just the most absolute harmony. And the power was electricity between us. I felt like I was...Oh, God—
(*Looking around, suddenly self-conscious.*)
—like I was having a religious experience!

JOANNA

Maybe you were.

MARIA

Or maybe you were hungry from fasting.

CAROL

Gosh, I'm embarrassed.

LESLIE

(To CAROL.)

I've seen that look too. At home...when you play the piano after supper...sometimes I look up from the newspaper and...well...

(Matter-of-fact.)

it's just nice.

CAROL

What do you know? I'm always afraid I'm bothering you.

ROSIE

Well, you can bother me anytime, Sister!

LESLIE

Who's up for a swim?

(Crosses to door.)

HELENE

I am. Let me get my towel.

(Runs upstairs.)

CAROL

Sounds good to me.

(Gets up, crosses to door.)

MARIA

Me too.

LESLIE

Rosie?

ROSIE

Well of course! You don't think I came all this way just for the Deep Meaningful Sharing!

LESLIE

How about you, Joanna?

JOANNA

I have to go into the city for a bit. I'll catch up with you later.

(HELENE screams from upstairs.)

HELENE

This is too much!

(Descends, holding by its edges her "Grand Inquisitor" towel which has been starched stiff.)

All right—who's the closet starch freak?

LESLIE

"Vanity of vanities and all is vanity."

(Bolts out the front door.)

HELENE

(Running after her.)

I'll drown you for this!

CAROL

Come on—I want to see this!

(CAROL, MARIA and ROSIE exit with towels, beach bags, etc., laughing. JOANNA looks after them for a moment, then picks up car keys and exits. Lights fade.)

Scene 2

SETTING: *An hour later. Beach area.*

AT RISE: *Sounds of laughter in distance. CAROL and ROSIE, in bathing suits, run on, drying themselves briskly.*

ROSIE

That was such fun! This reunion was a terrific idea! I feel so...vitalized—like a new woman!

CAROL

It has been some weekend.

(Looking down at her body.)

I've really got to lose some weight.

ROSIE

No you don't! It's unaesthetic to be skinny—ask any Renaissance model.

CAROL

They're all dead.

ROSIE

Well, they didn't die from anorexia!

CAROL

Neither will I.

ROSIE

You've got a great body, Carol.

CAROL

And it's getting "greater" every day.
(Spreads her towel.)

ROSIE

Aw—come on!

CAROL

(Picks up suntan lotion.)

I really can't figure it. I eat the same as I always did. Maybe it's just we're getting older. But you're still thin.

ROSIE

It's because you're not getting any.

CAROL

Any what?

ROSIE

Sex!

CAROL

(Putting lotion on her arms.)

Come on—what does that have to do with it?!

ROSIE

Everything. You never saw a fat nymphomaniac, did you?

CAROL

I've seen plenty of skinny celibates.

ROSIE

Are you sure?

CAROL

(Trying to put lotion on her back.)

Rosie! You're more outrageous than ever!

ROSIE

Here—let me do that.

(Takes lotion.)

CAROL

Thanks.

(Lies on her stomach.)

I really don't know why I bother. I'll burn anyway.

(Silence as ROSIE puts lotion on CAROL's back.)

ROSIE

You've got gorgeous skin, Carol. It's absolutely...translucent. I remember that from the old days.

CAROL

How could you? All we ever saw of each other was five pounds of serge and eight inches of face.

ROSIE

Once I saw you getting out of the tub in the Novitiate. I was waiting in line and the curtain wasn't pulled all the way. I remember it exactly: you put each leg on the side of the tub as you dried it. I remember thinking how nice the curve of your shoulder was. And that kind of scrubbed-pink flush of your skin—like now.

CAROL

(A little embarrassed.)

It must be strange to be an artist. I mean things that embarrass other people are so...clinical to you.

ROSIE

Clinical?

CAROL

You know—seeing everything like you were going to paint it—all curves and colors.

ROSIE
That's not the way I saw you.

CAROL
Oh?

ROSIE
What do *you* think was going on that day in choir?

CAROL
You said it was a religious experience.

ROSIE
Shit, Carol. With everybody there, what else *could* I say?

CAROL
(Rolls over, facing ROSIE; a sincere question.)
I don't know. What else could you say?

ROSIE
I was having an *orgasm*, for Christ's sake!

CAROL
(Sits up.)
An orgasm! In choir?!

ROSIE
What better place?

CAROL
Oh my God!

ROSIE
That's what I said. It was *wonderful*!

CAROL
But how could you--? I mean...without even touching!

ROSIE
It was a very spiritual orgasm.
(Both burst into laughter. Then, an awkward silence. CAROL reaches for the cap to the lotion, screws it on nervously. ROSIE puts her hand on CAROL's.)
Carol—I'd like to make love with you.

CAROL
What!?

ROSIE
Well, not right this second. I mean we could go inside.

CAROL

(Stares at her, dumbfounded.)

You too? I don't believe this is happening! What am I doing here?

ROSIE

Dammit, I've done it again. I'm sorry, Carol. I didn't mean to..upset you.

(No response.)

Are you angry?

CAROL

Angry?

(Beat.)

No, I...I don't know. I'm...I guess I'm confused.

ROSIE

Yeah. Me too.

CAROL

I mean is this how it works?

ROSIE

How what works?

CAROL

You look across the room at somebody when you're singing. And you get sort of carried up in the music and you have these good feelings about each other and your eyes get all soft, and...I mean is that how it works?

ROSIE

No, I don't think that's the way most people get their orgasms.

CAROL

I'm not talking about...that.

ROSIE

I know, I know.

CAROL

I mean, look—I'm a singer. I love to sing. I sing at First Communion and weddings and parties. I get all emotional when I sing. It happens to me...a lot.

ROSIE

Do you ever act on it?

CAROL

On what?

ROSIE

Your feelings?

CAROL

What do you mean?

ROSIE

I mean when you have these feelings for somebody, just walk across the room and ask them to go to bed with you.

CAROL

Are you kidding?!

ROSIE

Why not?

CAROL

Why *not!!* This is unreal. I don't believe this is happening.

ROSIE

What?

CAROL

This conversation.

ROSIE

Carol, have you ever had sex with anyone?

(Beat.)

You don't have to answer.

CAROL

(Beat.)

No.

ROSIE

Have you ever wanted to?

CAROL

(Beat.)

I...I think so.

ROSIE

Well, why didn't you?

CAROL

Because the guy was always a priest. Or married.

ROSIE

Then maybe you didn't really want to.

(Beat.)

How about women.

CAROL

No!

ROSIE

You never loved a woman?

CAROL

No!

(Beat.)

I mean, yes, of course I've loved women. I love Leslie. I loved you. But not...not that way.

ROSIE

How do you know?

CAROL

I just know!

(An awkward silence.)

Look...please don't be..insulted, Rosie.

(ROSIE shrugs.)

We're just...different.

(ROSIE nods. CAROL softens.)

When did you find out about...I mean did you know in the convent?

ROSIE

(Shaking her head "No.")

There was a woman in my support group two years ago—a writer. She was so good to me. And there was another artist who helped me with my superimposing techniques. We worked together a lot of nights, until...I mean when I like somebody and share and seem to be on the same wave length and all...it just seems natural for me to want to...I'm just such an *impulsive* person. You know what I mean?

(No response.)

I'm the demonstrative type. I mean I always want to show how I feel. Do you know what I'm talking about?

(No response.)

Carol?

CAROL

I remember your whole family was like that—always touching each other. I used to be a little jealous on visiting day. You all seemed to...to enjoy each other so much.

ROSIE

Yes, that's it! I enjoy people, I do! I mean I love Stephen...in a different sort of way. And I love my baby—I wouldn't give him up for the world. But I love other people too! Other women. And I want to know them—experience them. I mean isn't that what life's all about? Not making money or getting famous, but touching other people. I mean really touching.

CAROL

But what about...

(She trails off.)

ROSIE

Go ahead—ask it.

CAROL

Don't you feel guilty?

ROSIE

Of course! I even thought that by coming here this weekend and being with you all again—I mean, you know, reliving all those days of innocence, that somehow I'd get the will power to...that I'd just hate myself so much that I'd stop being...the way I am.

CAROL

But you didn't.

ROSIE

Well, no! I can't tell you what I felt when Joanna said she was in gay ministry. I just wanted to cry. I mean somebody in the Church actually cared—one of my own sisters. I felt so...so relieved—like a human being again.

CAROL

But what about your baby, Rosie? What's going to become of him? Of your family?

ROSIE

I don't know.

CAROL

It seems so...unfair. I mean there's nothing I want more than children. And a husband, and a home of my own. And here you are—risking it all.

ROSIE

It's terrible, isn't it?

(Starting to cry.)

You probably hate me. You're such a *perfect* person—things like this don't happen to you. You probably think I'm... perverted or something.

CAROL

No, Rosie--

(Touches her hand.)

I don't think you're perverted.

ROSIE

Are you sure?

CAROL

(Beat.)

I'm sure.

(They look at each other for a moment. ROSIE leans over and kisses CAROL on the mouth, gently, their bodies not touching. CAROL, after a second, pulls back, surprised by her own response. ROSIE looks at her apprehensively. Beat. CAROL leans over and kisses ROSIE gently on the mouth. During this exchange, LESLIE enters, unseen by the others, in time to see both kisses. She stops drying herself and stands stunned, then starts to leave. CAROL notices her, jumps up.)

CAROL

Leslie! Wait a minute!

(LESLIE doesn't stop or answer. CAROL runs after her, reaches for her.)

Where are you going?

LESLIE

(Pulling away from CAROL.)

Home.

CAROL

No—wait!

LESLIE

You can come with me if you want.

CAROL

But we can't...I mean, the others will—

LESLIE

I don't give a damn about the others!

ROSIE

Leslie, it's not what you think.

LESLIE

How do you know what I think?!

ROSIE

We were just trying to—

LESLIE

I saw what you were trying to do. I have eyes, goddammit!

CAROL

Leslie, please don't leave.

LESLIE

Why not? You seem to be having a good enough time without me.

CAROL

Stop saying that!

LESLIE

Well, what do you want me to say?

CAROL

I don't want you to say anything! I want you to listen!

LESLIE

All right. I'm listening.

CAROL

Rosie was telling me about her...well, some...problems she's having and...and I...I was just trying to...comfort her.

LESLIE

Is that what you call it?

CAROL

Isn't that true, Rosie?

ROSIE

Leslie, I know what you think—you think I was trying to seduce Carol. But I wasn't. What you saw...I mean it just...happened. I know you feel betrayed, but there's no reason to—

LESLIE

Betrayed? Why should I feel betrayed?

ROSIE

Because of...your relationship with Carol.

LESLIE

My relationship with Carol has nothing to do with...with that!

ROSIE

Then why are you so anxious to take her home?

LESLIE

Because I...I don't want her to get hurt.

ROSIE

Did she look like she was hurting?

(Beat.)

LESLIE

Are you coming, Carol?

CAROL

I don't think it would be right to just...leave. I mean it would spoil the weekend for the others. What about Joanna and Maria and—

LESLIE

What about me!

ROSIE

What about you, Leslie? If you don't feel betrayed, what do you feel? Tell us.

LESLIE

It's none of *your* business, is it?

ROSIE

Then tell Carol.

(Picks up her towel.)

Tell her what you feel.

ROSIE (*Cont.*)

LESLIE
(*Looking at CAROL.*)
Maybe she should tell me what she feels.

ROSIE
I'm going up to the house. I'll see you at dinner, Carol. I hope I'll see you too, Leslie.
(*Exits.*)

LESLIE
(*After a pause.*)
Well?

CAROL
Well what? Is this the Last Judgment or something?

LESLIE
I don't judge you.

CAROL
Could've fooled me.

LESLIE
What you do is...up to you.

CAROL
(*Gently.*)
Do you feel betrayed?

LESLIE
I feel...scared. I don't understand...what's happening.

CAROL
Me either.

LESLIE
Did you...did you like it?

CAROL
I...I don't know. I was more surprised than anything.

LESLIE
At what?

CAROL
That it was...that I was letting myself do it. That it didn't seem so...terrible. I mean...when you're in it.

LESLIE
And now?

Now what? CAROL

Now what do we do? LESLIE

We don't have to do anything. I mean what happened isn't a big deal. CAROL

What would've happened if I hadn't come when I did? LESLIE

Nothing.... We would have been embarrassed and...and gone for another swim. CAROL
(Beat.)
I'm sorry...I'm sorry you came when you did.

I'll bet you are. LESLIE

Leslie, don't be like this. CAROL

Well, how do you want me to be? LESLIE

I want you to be what you've always been—my best friend. CAROL

Your best friend? LESLIE

Yes. CAROL
(Pause.)

Is that enough? LESLIE

There's nothing better, is there? CAROL

Not as long as you think so too. LESLIE
(Beat.)

I think so too. CAROL
(Crossfade.)

Scene 3

SETTING: *Motherhouse*

AT RISE: *Lights up on NAOMI and JOANNA.*

NAOMI

How's the reunion going?

JOANNA

(Quoting.)

"I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each."

NAOMI

(Quoting.)

"I do not think that they will sing to me."

JOANNA

(Nostalgic.)

You should have come. You know you really should have come.

NAOMI

Why?

JOANNA

Because you were the most special of all.

NAOMI

Is that what it's about?

JOANNA

Do you remember my crisis of faith in the Novitiate?

NAOMI

(Teasing.)

Which one?

JOANNA

I was having terrible cramps. I said that any God who created women to menstruate four hundred times just to produce a half dozen children was too inefficient to be believed in. And that in any case, nuns should be exempt.

NAOMI

I brought a hot toddy to your cell that night.

JOANNA

It restored my faith.

NAOMI

You were always too hard on yourself. Perfectionists are prone to cramps.

JOANNA
Is that how you rationalized it?

NAOMI
What?

JOANNA
Singling me out.

NAOMI
My darling Joanna, it was you who singled yourself out. All that burning intensity.... When I explained the Rule, it was you who questioned every archaic phrase. When I quoted Eliot, it was your eyes that lit up. When the others came for counseling, they talked of homesickness; you talked of St. Teresa's ecstasies. Your appetite for sanctity was insatiable. You devoured God like some possessed cannibal. And you devoured me.

JOANNA
Was I that bad?

NAOMI
You were the joy of my life.
(Beat.)
Joanna—the Council voted "no support" for your work in gay ministry.

JOANNA
You're the Provincial Superior. You could override the Council.

NAOMI
You know it doesn't work that way anymore.

JOANNA
I liked you better as God.

NAOMI
For the record, I voted against censuring you.

JOANNA
I'll bet! Written right into the minutes as the shining liberal since you knew the bigots would carry the vote anyway.

NAOMI
Give it up, Joanna.

JOANNA
I can't.

NAOMI
Think about it, please, before you say that, Sister. And pray. Because if you decide to continue in this work, you will not do so as a nun.

JOANNA
No! Mother—you can't do that. You wouldn't.

NAOMI

So long as you are vowed to Obedience, I can. And if it's necessary, I will. But believe me, Joanna, I don't want to. You were one of my own novices. I've watched you over the years hold steadfast as so many of the others left. I feel a special loyalty to you as a daughter. But I have other daughters—your sisters. I must think of them. And so must you.

JOANNA

But I do.

NAOMI

You care for the few at the expense of the many.

JOANNA

You told us on profession day: "Those with the greatest need have the first right to help."

NAOMI

And they have help—God's help.

JOANNA

That's easy to say if you haven't been there.

NAOMI

No, Sister, it's only easy to say if you have been there.

(Pause, as JOANNA, wondering if this is a confession, waits for NAOMI to say more. When she doesn't, JOANNA decides to risk a confession herself.)

JOANNA

Mother, I'm a lesbian. I always have been. I know that now.

NAOMI

Do you mean you've felt...affection for other sisters?

JOANNA

More than affection for a few.

(Beat.)

Including you.

NAOMI

We're all drawn to some people more than others. It's only natural.

JOANNA

It's more than that.

NAOMI

Have your relationships...have they included...?

JOANNA

No. But I *have* felt sexual attraction...yearnings that I...I couldn't quite identify. But you recognized them, didn't you?

I?
NAOMI

You came between Maria and me.
JOANNA

Particular friendships threaten community spirit. It was my responsibility to preserve it.
NAOMI

You resented Maria.
JOANNA

For what?
NAOMI

She didn't idolize you the way I did. Besides, she was a mere human who sapped the energy I could have been giving to God...and to you. You were jealous.
JOANNA

It's God who's the jealous lover.
NAOMI

I was lonely.
JOANNA

The grace is given to those who ask.
NAOMI

You were jealous.
JOANNA

I was Mistress of Novices!
(*Softening.*)
You showed such promise, Love. Whatever insights I offered, the very energy in the air between us, you inhaled. You sucked at my spirit like some hungry babe at the breast....I had such hopes for you...such fond hopes that you would become all the things I—
JOANNA

All the things you were.
JOANNA

All the things I could never be.
NAOMI

And your desire for my spiritual growth—your...passion for me—was it entirely maternal?
JOANNA

What else?
NAOMI

JOANNA

Once I came to you and confessed that I...that I longed for the day when we might be equals—teaching together at some parish school, because then—when I was older—then we might be friends, and I could give you the understanding...the comfort that I couldn't give you as a novice.

NAOMI

I remember.

JOANNA

You took my hands in yours, and I knew...I knew from the look in your eyes that I had guessed your own yearnings. Then you laughed. You held my hands and said—

NAOMI

(Taking JOANNA's hands.)

I held your hands and said: "It could happen, Love. Maybe twenty years from now I'll be out there with you."

JOANNA

Time's up, Love. Are you out here with me?

NAOMI

What do you want from me, Joanna?

JOANNA

Your blessing. I want your blessing—on me and my work.

NAOMI

I love you, Joanna.

JOANNA

I want your blessing.

*(They look at each other; then NAOMI's eyes drop.
Lights fade.)*

Scene 4

SETTING: *Beach house. Saturday evening.*

AT RISE: *ROSIE, CAROL, LESLIE, HELENE, MARIA are gathered around JOANNA.*

HELENE

Shit, Joanna, why don't you just leave the convent? Hey—you can come and live with Neil and me!

ROSIE

Sure. And cook spaghetti dinners.

MARIA

And take care of the baby.

JOANNA

I don't think I'm cut out for the domestic scene.

HELENE

What *would* you do if you left?

JOANNA

I've never thought about leaving.

MARIA

Never?

JOANNA

From the time I was seven, I knew I had to be a nun.

HELENE

So did I. At seven we didn't know any better.

JOANNA

But I still feel called.

HELENE

You mean you're not fit for anything else.

JOANNA

It's where I can be most effective.

CAROL

Because people put more stock in what nuns say?

JOANNA

Because God wants me here.

MARIA

Then what *are* you going to do, Joanna? Give up your work?

JOANNA

I don't want to. But I...I can't imagine leaving the convent.

HELENE

Why not? We did.

JOANNA

(With resignation-accusation.)

Yeah.

ROSIE

It doesn't seem fair. I mean if you believe this is what God wants you to do, they have no right to stop you.

LESLIE

Maybe they do have a right to be concerned. I mean as long as Joanna's in the order, what she does is a reflection on all of them.

JOANNA

But that's just it—they're afraid of their own reflection. Afraid to take a hard look at the reality.

CAROL

What reality?

JOANNA

The reality that there are lots of perfectly decent people who happen to be homosexual. Some of them nuns. Or ex-nuns. I mean look around the room!

(Pause. They look at HELENE.)

HELENE

Don't look at me!

ROSIE

I think we should come out to Mother Naomi. Maybe it would make a difference.

JOANNA

I did, and it didn't.

HELENE

(To ROSIE.)

What do you mean, "we"?

ROSIE

Well, you. And...and me.

HELENE

You! Oh God, here come the sordid tales of geriatric orgies!

CAROL

Shut up, Helene.

JOANNA

How long have you known, Rosie?

ROSIE

A couple of years.

(Beat.)

It just feels right to me. So...natural and comfortable.

MARIA

Does Stephen know?

ROSIE

I wish I could be honest with him. But I'm afraid. Oh, it's all a big mess. And it must sound awful to you all. But maybe I wouldn't be in this mess if there had been somebody back then doing the work Joanna's doing now...I mean maybe I never would've gotten married. That's why it's so important for you to go on, Joanna. Couldn't you talk to the Council?

JOANNA

I've tried.

CAROL

Maybe if you promised to keep it out of the newspapers.

JOANNA

But I want people to know there are nuns and priests who question the party line. It's the first step to change.

HELENE

They don't want change! And they certainly don't want that kind of publicity.

JOANNA

That's true enough. Every time I've been called to the motherhouse, it's been right after some article was published. They say people have called in and said they're scandalized.

MARIA

What people?

JOANNA

They won't tell me their names.

ROSIE

Maybe *we* should call in and say we're delighted.

CAROL

Oh sure.

JOANNA

That's not a bad idea.

LESLIE

What!?

HELENE

(Miming phone call.)

"Hello, Mother Naomi? This is Helene Burgess. I'm calling because I saw this article in the paper about Sister Joanna defending queers. And I just want to say I think it's wonderful 'cause I was queer myself once."

ROSIE

But seriously—what if we did speak up?

MARIA

You mean tell Mother Naomi to leave Joanna alone?

JOANNA

Well, it would have to be more than that. Some sort of public statement.

LESLIE

Public statement? Of what?

ROSIE

Of support! You know—like taking out an ad in the New York Times.

HELENE

Oh, right. "Attention world: we five nobodies think Sister Joanna is doing great work."

ROSIE

Shit! If we were still nuns, we'd be somebodies.

CAROL

Jo—you've been doing this work for years. Was there something that...tipped the scales against you?

JOANNA

I organized a retreat for lesbian nuns.

ROSIE

Oh, my God!

(JOANNA crosses. Crossfade with her.)

Scene 5

SETTING: *Motherhouse.*

AT RISE: *NAOMI and JOANNA.*

NAOMI

This is the last straw, Joanna.

JOANNA

Look, Mother—ten percent of the population is gay. You must know there are nuns who are lesbians.

NAOMI

Why should they be encouraged to acknowledge it publicly?

JOANNA

Because they have special problems living in a community of women.

NAOMI

The individual sister should discuss these problems with her superior.

JOANNA

But they feel so isolated, so different. It isn't celibacy that gives them the most trouble. It's fear—fear that they'll be dismissed if they confide in superiors, fear that other nuns—their own friends—would turn away in disgust if they knew. They need to hear other sisters say they share their feelings. Is that asking too much?

NAOMI

I understand their distress.

JOANNA

Do you?

NAOMI

But there is more than the welfare of these individuals to consider. There is the reputation of the entire community.

JOANNA

Reputation?

NAOMI

If we admit that there are...a few homosexually-oriented sisters, people will think...well, people will think that...

JOANNA

That all nuns are lesbians?

NAOMI

Yes.

JOANNA

What does it matter if they think that—so long as we're celibate?

NAOMI

Don't be naive, Joanna.

JOANNA

We can't afford to worry so much about what people think!

NAOMI

We can't afford not to! How many Catholic families would encourage their daughters to become nuns if—

JOANNA

How many are doing it now? We had sixty novices in my class. This year there are two. What have we got to lose?

NAOMI

Our opportunity to do good as members of a religious community.

JOANNA

Then maybe we'll have to find some other way to do good.

NAOMI

Are you prepared to jeopardize a way of life that has worked for fifteen hundred years?

JOANNA

Yes—if it doesn't work anymore!

NAOMI

Have you no loyalty to the community? To the Church?

JOANNA

My loyalty is to the Gospel.

NAOMI

Your loyalty is to the press!

JOANNA

Because I want the truth to be known?

NAOMI

Joanna, people don't always know what to do with the truth.

JOANNA

Does that mean they shouldn't hear it?

NAOMI

It means they don't *want* to hear it until—

JOANNA

You mean *you* don't want them to hear it. You don't want people to know there are nuns who are lesbians.

(JOANNA returns to beach house. Crossfade with her.)

Scene 6

SETTING: *Beach house. As in Scene 4.*

ROSIE

That's it then!

LESLIE

What?

ROSIE

We'll tell people.

CAROL

Tell people that there are lesbian nuns?

ROSIE

Tell people that *we* were lesbian nuns.

LESLIE

But we weren't! I mean some of us weren't. I wasn't. Carol wasn't. Maria wasn't.

JOANNA

(To MARIA.)

Ria?

MARIA

I...I did have...strong feelings for...I was in love with...another Sister...once.

(Pause. All wait for her to go on. She doesn't.)

CAROL

We all had...feelings. It's not the same thing. I mean how can you be homosexual if you don't have sex with women?

ROSIE

How can you be heterosexual if you don't have sex with men? Anyway, maybe it doesn't have to include sex. Maybe it's just where a person's real emotional investment is.

JOANNA

Carol, apart from your family, who's your strongest bond with?

CAROL

Well, Leslie, of course. I mean we've been best friends for twenty-five years. But we're not... lovers.

ROSIE

That's a shame.

LESLIE

We don't need your goddamn sympathy!

JOANNA

All right, all right. We couldn't all say we were homosexually active in the convent. But couldn't we admit that attraction for women played some part in our choosing that life? I know I entered partly because I wanted to live with other women.

HELENE

But even that's not true for the rest of us.

JOANNA

Will you or Rosie or Maria deny your attraction to women?

HELENE

O.K., I was attracted to Dana. But it takes more than one relationship to make a homosexual.

JOANNA

Does it take more than one to make a heterosexual? ...Rosie, how many men have you slept with?

ROSIE

Well...only Stephen.

JOANNA

And how many women?

ROSIE

I guess...a few.

JOANNA

(To HELENE.)

So what does that make her?

HELENE

What about Maria? She's happily married.

(To MARIA.)

Aren't you?

MARIA

Yes.

HELENE

So maybe you were attracted to women just because there weren't any men around.

JOANNA

Maria, if you saw that Sister today—the one you were in love with—would you...would you still love her?...in the same way?

MARIA

(Beat.)

Yes.

JOANNA

And what about you, Helene? If Dana were alive today, would you still love her?

HELENE
But she's not alive.

JOANNA
Would you?

HELENE
So what does that make me? Dana was the only...I'm not attracted to other women!

JOANNA
Not even to Leslie?

LESLIE
Leave me out of it!

JOANNA
Isn't that what last night's "scene" was all about?

HELENE
You'd like to think so, wouldn't you?

JOANNA
Wasn't it?

HELENE
For a moment Leslie reminded me of Dana. That's all.

JOANNA
Maybe it was Dana that reminded you of Leslie.

LESLIE
That's not true!

HELENE
Stop distorting everybody's life to fit your own scenario, Joanna. You're not Mother Superior here!

JOANNA
Look—you're the people I'm trying to help! Don't you see—

LESLIE
Now wait a minute!

JOANNA
We belong to an oppressed group that—

LESLIE
(Shouting.)
I do not belong to any oppressed group!

MARIA

Jo, I understand why you're doing this, but no one should have to say she's...something she doesn't believe she is.

JOANNA

Even if she *is* what she doesn't believe she is?

LESLIE

Come off it, Joanna! Who do you think you are—God? I mean what the hell is this all about? Sure, I'd like to see you do whatever work you feel called to do. And if you have some personal stake in it, that's your business. But don't make me out to be some kind of traitor because I'm not what you are!

HELENE

O.K., O.K., look—we're just not going to find a label that we can all agree on. So why waste time trying?

ROSIE

But I wish there were *something* we could do.

HELENE

Our stories are different. That's all there is to it.

(Pause. They seem to be at an impasse.)

JOANNA

Maybe that's it—we could just tell our different stories.

MARIA

What do you mean?

JOANNA

Well, I could say I've always been attracted to women.

(To MARIA.)

You could say you were in the convent. Helene could say she was once, but isn't now. Rosie could say she wasn't before, but is now. Carol could say—

LESLIE

Carol!

JOANNA

What could you say, Carol?

CAROL

Well, I...I don't think I could say anything.

LESLIE

She couldn't say anything!

JOANNA

Could you say you've never been sexually attracted to men—even the ones you liked?

(CAROL starts to say something, but doesn't.)

ROSIE

(To CAROL.)

Couldn't you say that what you felt passing between us...that day in choir...might have been a sexual feeling?

LESLIE

Stop trying to put words in her mouth!

JOANNA

Could you say the feelings you have for Leslie may have just the slightest—

LESLIE

Listen, Sister, if you don't shut up, I'm going to--

JOANNA

And what about you, Leslie? What exactly is it you feel when you look up from your newspaper at Carol playing the piano?

LESLIE

(Shouting.)

Nothing! I feel nothing! Don't you understand that? I have never in my life felt anything sexual for anybody! Not for anybody! And that's the truth. Now leave me alone! All of you!

(Storms out front door. CAROL gets up to follow her, but is intercepted by JOANNA.)

JOANNA

Don't, Carol.

CAROL

That was brutal.

JOANNA

Somebody had to ask her the question she won't ask herself.

CAROL

Is that your version of charity?

JOANNA

She's not one of your retarded children, Carol. She's a grown woman.

CAROL

A woman in pain, thanks to you.

JOANNA

She asked to be left alone.

(Softening.)

Wait a little. You know she won't let you help her now.

(Knowing this to be true, CAROL reluctantly sits back down. Pause.)

HELENE

Well! Isn't it nice that small groups are so uninhibited?

CAROL

What do you want from us, Joanna? Why did you bring us here? Why the five of us—and not the other fifty-five?

ROSIE

You suspected we were the gay ten percent, didn't you?

JOANNA

No! Well, I mean, I never suspected you, Rosie.

CAROL

Then why?

JOANNA

I told you—you mattered most to me. It matters to me what you...do.

HELENE

You mean it matters what we think of what *you* do.

JOANNA

Is that so different?

HELENE

Of course it's different! Can't we approve of you without being the same as you?

JOANNA

Then for God's sake *do* it! Approve of me! Stand up and be counted!

HELENE

By saying we're like you?

JOANNA

By telling your own story—including whatever small part of it makes you like me. By telling the *truth*! Is that too much to ask?!

HELENE

(Shouting.)

Yes! Why is it so goddamn important to tell the truth?!

JOANNA

Because...because the truth will make us free.

HELENE

It'll make *you* free. The rest of us will be crucified! Can't you get that through your self-centered little skull?

JOANNA

Look—you owe me this! I loved you—I loved each of you and you abandoned me!

CAROL

What?

JOANNA

(Desperate.)

We were sisters—a family, a community...with ideals. We were going to do God's work... together. What happened to that? All the wrongs we were going to right, all the needy we were going to serve—they're still there. But you're not! You left! And now you've got your husbands and lovers and children and your homes and your work. And I've got none of that. For twenty years I've kept my vows with no one but God to tell what I was feeling. And where were you?! Don't you see—I need you now. You're all I have!

(Pause.)

MARIA

What can we do, Jo?

JOANNA

Tell your stories.

MARIA

I don't think I understand...what good would they do...these confessions?

JOANNA

If the five of us admit publicly to having homosexual feelings, people will know that...some nuns are lesbians.

CAROL

Who would these stories be told to?

JOANNA

A reporter. Helene—how about you? You could send it to the Saturday Review. Do you still know anybody there?

HELENE

No. Write it yourself.

ROSIE

Yeah! You could send it to Psychology Today—a case studies thing.

HELENE

At least that way you could change the names.

JOANNA

But we'd have to identify the order or our purpose is defeated.

MARIA

I think I've lost track. What *is* our purpose?

ROSIE

To give them bad publicity.

MARIA

And how does that help Joanna?

HELENE

They kick her out—we make them squirm. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord.

MARIA

But I thought we wanted to persuade them *not* to kick her out.

ROSIE

Good point.

JOANNA

What if I write the article...but don't publish it—

ROSIE

But what's the point of—?

JOANNA

—yet. First I show it to Mother Naomi.

(Pause.)

CAROL

That's blackmail.

JOANNA

You said it.

CAROL

That's pretty low.

ROSIE

Any lower than the ultimatum they've given her?

CAROL

But I thought it was the Council's decision.

JOANNA

She could get the Council to reverse its decision...if she tried.

MARIA

And if she doesn't? Will you publish it?

JOANNA

Yes.

MARIA

Jo—are you sure you can do that—to Mother Naomi?

JOANNA

No. But I'll try.

HELENE

You're really a dangerous animal, aren't you?

JOANNA

Only when wounded.
(Pause.)

ROSIE

It would work, though, wouldn't it? We've got to go through with it!

CAROL

Joanna—are you sure this is what you want?

JOANNA

I know it's asking a lot of you. But we'd all be taking the risk together.

ROSIE

That's it! That's what sisterhood is all about. Joanna—you've got my story.

JOANNA

Maria? Are you with us? Can you do it...for the Sister you loved?

MARIA

(After a beat.)
 Yes. I'll do it.

JOANNA

Helene? How about it?

HELENE

Ask me in the morning.

JOANNA

Don't you owe it to Dana?

HELENE

I said I'd tell you in the morning! I won't be blackmailed into this, Joanna! Look, we've all had a long, stressful twenty-four hours—thanks to you. And I don't think it's fair to put this kind of pressure on us. You could at least give us time to sleep on it.

(Pause.)

JOANNA

Fair enough.
(Starts out door.)

MARIA

Where are you going?

JOANNA

To find Leslie. And apologize.

(JOANNA exits. Others freeze as lights crossfade to porch as LESLIE comes onto it. The two look at each other. Beat.)

Full moon.

JOANNA

I told you to leave me alone.

LESLIE

I didn't come to...I came to apologize.

JOANNA

And that's supposed to make everything O.K.?

LESLIE

No. But maybe it'll make some things...better.

JOANNA

Like what?

LESLIE

Like our damaged friendship?

JOANNA

We=re not friends. We were classmates twenty years ago. That doesn=t make us friends.

LESLIE

All right. Then the good will between us.

JOANNA

I don't need your good will.

LESLIE

But I need yours. I'm sorry, Leslie. I really am sorry. I guess I...had you wrong.

JOANNA

Why do you have to do this?

LESLIE

I don't expect you to understand.

JOANNA

I'm sure I'm too stupid for that?

LESLIE

I don't understand it myself.

JOANNA

(Ignoring the sarcasm.)

(Beat.)

I wish it were a simpler problem—with a simple solution.

(Beat.)

Remember when old Sister Margaret had the stroke, and you built that contraption so she could feed herself?

LESLIE

Basic mechanics.

JOANNA

Compounded with imagination...and compassion.

LESLIE

It wasn't a big deal.

JOANNA

Why do you always underestimate yourself?

LESLIE

Don't start on me, Joanna!

JOANNA

I'm sorry. Again. Leslie, if I could just make the whole weekend go away for you, I would.

LESLIE

Why don't you just make yourself go away?

(Beat. JOANNA walks off porch. Lights fade. Sounds of sea come up.)

Scene 7

SETTING: *Sunday morning. Beach area.*

AT RISE: *Sounds of seagulls, ocean, Lights up on MARIA sitting, looking out. JOANNA approaches her.*

JOANNA

Is this apple tree taken, Miss?

MARIA

I'm expecting the snake any minute.

JOANNA

And what will she do?

MARIA

Tempt me, of course.

JOANNA

Do you still need tempting?

MARIA

I'm afraid what I need is to resist.

JOANNA

Oh.

(Beat.)

Want some help?

MARIA

Won't that be out of character? Can the snake really change her skin?

JOANNA

Reverse psychology. Very serpentine. Temptation Number One: any decision that makes you feel rotten must be a bad one. Describe symptoms.

MARIA

No sleep. Sick stomach. Clammy palms. Dry mouth.

JOANNA

Classic. Temptation Number Two: consideration of potential losses. Enumerate.

MARIA

Husband. Children. Security.

JOANNA

Impressive list. Temptation Number Three: questioning of motives. Let's see...you're doing this because...you want to be honest.

MARIA

I am honest. I honestly am happily married.

JOANNA

And honestly not a lesbian.

MARIA

I have passionately loved one woman in my life. This obsession has given me moments of pure joy followed by years of pain and anger.

JOANNA

Who needs it, eh?

MARIA

Joanna—last night you extorted my confession to pressure the others without knowing how I would feel about making it.

JOANNA

Why did you go along?

MARIA

Because you needed it so desperately.

JOANNA

Why do you care?

MARIA

I love you. Because you're passionate and uncompromising. Because you see things as you think they should be—as you want them to be—and are intolerant of anything less. Because you're special. And for a moment—for as long as I was important in your life—I was special too... ordinary as I am. You had me believing I could write poetry and...modernize the whole Church. And last night you did it again. You had me—and the others too—believing we could change the world. Five of us were going to reverse centuries of discrimination. But we can't, Jo—any more than I can write like Dante.

JOANNA

Your terza rima was coming along nicely.

MARIA

The trouble is you challenge people to rise to dangerous heights. And then you're not there to catch them if they fall.

JOANNA

What do you mean?

MARIA

Where will *you* be when Carol and Leslie destroy a good friendship? When Neil walks out on Helene? When Stephen gets custody of Rosie's boy? If Peter puts me out, will you be there to take me in?

JOANNA

You're being melodramatic. Peter's not going to—

MARIA

Answer me! Are you ready to leave the convent and pick up where we left off? Would you have called me at all if I hadn't been safely married? Is that what you waited for?

JOANNA

No! I mean yes—I would have! Ria, I didn't know what I was. For years. But I knew I had failed you in some important way that wasn't clear and couldn't be talked about before. And I wanted to talk about it. I'm glad we did.

MARIA

Is it over then? Are we going to see each other anymore?

JOANNA

Do you want to?

MARIA

I would like to be friends. Do you think we can be friends—without the romance?

JOANNA

Are you sure that's what you want?

MARIA

It's what I can afford.

JOANNA

But *can* we be friends without the romance? What if it's not something superimposed like Rosie's spiderwebs? What if it's in our chemistry? Or in our history?

MARIA

You never used to be such a determinist.

JOANNA

Before this reunion I wondered. Now I know.

MARIA

What?

JOANNA

That even if we meet in a restaurant instead of the apple orchard, I will be distracted by how wonderful you smell. That even if we talk of nothing but work and children and books, I will want, afterwards, to lay my head on your breast and be comforted...for all the things that are not as they should be.

MARIA

Perhaps in time that desire would pass.

JOANNA

I don't want it to! It's precious to me.

MARIA

But in the long run, wouldn't it be destructive.?

JOANNA

Then there must be no long run. We won't see each other.

MARIA

There it is still—that same exasperating all-or-nothing attitude!

JOANNA

You used to find it charming.

MARIA

It *is* charming—in adolescents. But grown-up people learn to make compromises.

JOANNA

So now I'm Peter Pan.

MARIA

You always did want to fly.

JOANNA

Ria, I love you. I don't want to disrupt your marriage. I'm not asking you to be deceitful. But you mustn't ask it of me either. Don't ask me to subdue my feelings into something tamer and less true. I won't do it!

MARIA

What do you want, Joanna—perpetual tension and frustration?

JOANNA

I refuse to turn into a zombie just to spare myself the pain. I won't let go of you again.

MARIA

Not even if I..won't tell my story?

(JOANNA looks away.)

I can't do it, Jo. I'm not a risk-taker like you. I don't want to fly.

(Beat.)

Are you surprised?

JOANNA

Disappointed, I guess.

MARIA

Maybe you wouldn't be if you didn't have unrealistic expectations.

JOANNA

I can't change that.

MARIA

Can't or won't?

JOANNA

I feel so...alone.

MARIA

Then stop making that choice.

JOANNA

What do you mean?

MARIA

You still imagine there's some ideal state of what "should be." As though perfection were possible.

JOANNA

Yes, I long for it.

MARIA

Jo, listen to me. There is no Garden of Eden. The world's a messy place. People eat their apples and throw away the cores, and other people trip over them. Innocence is a dangerous illusion.

JOANNA

We had it once.

MARIA

Give it up, Jo...before it's too late.

JOANNA

I tell you we had it! All of us. We were sisters. A bonding as simple and pure as... chanting.

MARIA

The music of real life is not Gregorian chant. Open your ears, Jo. People don't sing in unison.

JOANNA

Not even you and I?

MARIA

Not even you and I.

JOANNA

Why not, Ria? Why can't we?

MARIA

Because I'd always be disappointing you.

(Pause. JOANNA gets up.)

JOANNA

You're not ordinary, you know.

(Beat.)

And you really could write poetry if you put your mind to it.

(JOANNA crosses to beach house. Crossfade with her.)

Scene 8

SETTING: *Beach house.*

AT RISE: *CAROL is folding the sheets from the sofa bed. Her suitcase and beach bag are packed. JOANNA enters from the porch, sees the packed bags.*

Up so early? JOANNA

I didn't sleep much anyway. CAROL

How's Leslie? JOANNA

She's...still upset. CAROL

Want some juice? JOANNA

No thanks. CAROL

(Folding up sofa bed.)

Truth is, we'd like to get an early start back. Leslie's packing the car now.

Oh. JOANNA

CAROL
Joanna, listen...I know this is going to upset you, but...I've thought about it all night, and...I don't think I can...go through with it.

Because of Leslie? JOANNA

CAROL
I don't see how I can do it—talk about my feelings for women—without having people assume that I'm...that we're.... I mean if the order is identified...well, even if the details are changed, some people might recognize us. And I...I just don't think I have the right to make the decision for both of us.

JOANNA
Couldn't you talk to Leslie about it? I know I was kind of rough on her last night. Maybe coming from you, it would seem...somehow less threatening.

CAROL
I know her.
(Shaking her head.)

CAROL (*Cont.*)

There's a lot to Leslie that most people...never get a chance to see. She's a good person.
(*ROSIE comes running frantically down the stairs in her nightgown.*)

ROSIE

My car! My car's gone!

JOANNA

What?

ROSIE

I looked out the window while I was sitting on the john—and it's not *there!*

CAROL

Are you sure that's where you left it?

ROSIE

Well sure I'm sure! It was right out back next to yours and Maria's. And now it's not *there* anymore!

CAROL

Where did you leave the keys?

ROSIE

The keys?

CAROL

The car keys.

ROSIE

Well, on the dresser in the bedroom, I guess. Or maybe in my purse. Or the beach bag. Oh, God, I don't remember!

CAROL

Come on, Rosie, try to think. Let's all just be calm a minute and maybe you'll be able to—

ROSIE

Be calm! Are you kidding? Stephen's gonna kill me when he finds out I did this again.

CAROL & JOANNA

Again?

ROSIE

Aw...

(*Miserable.*)

Once before I left the keys in the car and some kid took it for a joy ride and wrecked the transmission. Stephen was *so* pissed.

JOANNA

Maybe we ought to call the police.

ROSIE

(Going to phone.)

Oh God, if it's wrecked, I can't go home.

(Dials 911. Beat.)

Yes, I'd like to report a stolen car—I mean a missing car.

(Beat.)

Danger? No.

(Beat.)

Because I want the police, and 911 is the number to c--

*(Beat.)*Well, this *is* an emergency!*(Beat. Then to others.)*

I'm on hold.

JOANNA

How about some coffee?

ROSIE

Oh God, do I need it.

(Picks up phone, carries it to door, and sticks her head out looking for car.)

CAROL

Joanna—I hope you understand...

JOANNA

(Pouring coffee.)

That your first commitment is to Leslie?

CAROL

I'm frightened for myself too. I mean if anyone at work read about it, I'd probably lose my job.

JOANNA

You too?

CAROL

And my family couldn't handle it, I know that. And to tell the truth, I can't handle it myself.

(ROSIE, who has been vaguely aware of this conversation, now realizes what CAROL is doing.)

ROSIE

Can't handle what, Carol?

CAROL

I can't go through with it.

ROSIE

Why *not*?

CAROL

Because even thinking about the possibility makes me feel...well, you know, guilty.

ROSIE

You could get over that.

CAROL

I just don't want to risk messing up my life.

ROSIE

Is it so wonderful the way it is?

CAROL

At least I'm not cheating on my husband!

(ROSIE hangs up the phone.)

I'm sorry, Rosie, I didn't mean to sound...I'm sorry. I'm probably just jealous. I mean I guess I'd like to meet somebody I could love and share with and settle down with.

ROSIE

But you already *have*.

LESLIE

(Offstage.)

Carol!

CAROL

Look...Joanna. Yesterday I sort of...got carried along. I mean I don't really think my feelings for women are...sexual. I don't really believe I'm gay. And...and I don't want to be!

ROSIE

Nobody *wants* to be gay! Not in *this* world!

CAROL

(To ROSIE.)

This is between Joanna and me. It doesn't have anything to do with you.

ROSIE

(Miserable.)

Oh God, I wish it didn't.

JOANNA

What do you mean?

ROSIE

Well...I figured if just one person said no, it probably wouldn't make that much difference. But...

JOANNA

But what?

ROSIE

Dammit, I wish I weren't so *impulsive*! I promised my therapist I wouldn't make any impulsive decisions all week. You see the truth is that I don't consider all the pros and cons when I make a decision. I mean I don't weigh all the *consequences*. Know what I mean?

JOANNA

What consequences?

ROSIE

Well, like I love my work, but face it, the money I make from my photography wouldn't keep me in dog food.

JOANNA

What makes you think Stephen won't find out anyway?

ROSIE

It's true—he might.

JOANNA

You said yourself you wished you could be honest with him.

ROSIE

I *do*. But I can't—not yet. And anyway, do you know what he'd *do*?

CAROL

Divorce you if he has any sense.

ROSIE

I just can't bear the thought of losing my little boy. He'd feel deserted. I can't take that chance. I just can't.

JOANNA

But aren't you already taking chances?

ROSIE

Well, yes, but I try to be discreet.

CAROL

You—discreet?!

ROSIE

(Ignoring this.)

Joanna, if I were single and self-supporting—like *Carol*—you know I'd be there for you. Don't you?

(Pause. JOANNA crosses to table, puts mug down, notices an envelope addressed to her. She picks it up, studies the handwriting. ROSIE crosses to her.)

It's Helene's handwriting.

CAROL

What does it say?

JOANNA

(Opens envelope, reads aloud.)

"I Sister Helene humbly acknowledge that I am a coward."

ROSIE

Oh no.

JOANNA

(Continuing.)

"I want my baby. I want Neil to want it. And spilling my guts about Dana is not the way to persuade him. I know you will forgive me—that's what sisterhood is all about. And in time, I may be able to forgive myself. Thanks for the weekend of deep meaningful sharing. Joanna, you will do whatever you must, and we will be the richer for it. Your Sister, Helene.

(Beat.)

"P.S.: I've taken Rosie's car to the bus station. Key is under seat. I need the long ride home alone. It'll be my penance."

(JOANNA slides onto a chair. ROSIE moves behind her, puts her arms around her. CAROL moves closer too.)

ROSIE

I'm sorry, Joanna...about all of us. Oh, why does everything have to be so...complicated? If people could just be free to love each other...it could all be so simple.

JOANNA

Amen.

LESLIE

(Offstage.)

Carol! Are you coming?

(Sound of car engine starting.)

JOANNA

(Jumping up and calling offstage.)

She's being held captive—someone will have to come rescue her!

CAROL

Please don't start anything, Jo.

JOANNA

Me? Start something?

(LESLIE bursts in, then is somewhat embarrassed by her own urgency.)

Behold your knight in shining...polyester!

LESLIE

Shut up.

CAROL

Joanna, I hope...I hope you'll be all right.

(Picks up bags and exits.)

LESLIE

(Crossing to JOANNA.)

You know what your trouble is? Everybody's always told you you were special. And you believed it.

ROSIE

Leslie—can you give me a ride to the bus station?

LESLIE

Like that?

ROSIE

(Pulling LESLIE out the door onto the porch.)

Come on.

LESLIE

Where are you going in your nightgown?

ROSIE

No place.

LESLIE

Then why do you want a ride to the bus station?

ROSIE

A lot of old ladies ride buses. I thought I might pick up a few models.

(They exit. Sounds of car doors slamming and car taking off. JOANNA crosses to drawing, takes it off the wall and tears it up. The pieces trail behind her as she crosses to another part of the stage. Crossfade with her.)

Scene 9

SETTING: *Motherhouse.*

AT RISE: *Lights up on NAOMI and JOANNA.*

JOANNA

I wanted it so badly. I had to do it.
(*NAOMI nods.*)
It was all such a surprise—the weekend.

NAOMI

Not what you expected?

JOANNA

I don't know what I expected. But I always seem to expect too much. And everybody else pays.

NAOMI

Don't be so hard on yourself, Love.

JOANNA

Why not? Maybe if I were harder on myself, I could be easier on the rest of the world.

NAOMI

And maybe if you were easier on yourself, you could be easier on the rest of the world.

JOANNA

What kind of marshmallow philosophy is that from a novice mistress? Where's all the Spartan training of my youth?

NAOMI

In your own selective memory.

JOANNA

(*Beat.*)
Why are you still so important to me?

(*Beat.*)
Why am I still asking for your blessing...and the others for their approval. Why? Shouldn't it be...isn't it enough...to bless myself?

NAOMI

Can you?

JOANNA

I want to. Do you think I'll ever come to it?

NAOMI

Why is it so hard?

JOANNA

I don't know... I guess I resist blessing what isn't...

Perfect? NAOMI

Yes. JOANNA

Even the Church canonizes imperfect people. NAOMI

That doesn't mean I have to! JOANNA
(*Beat.*)
The trouble is everywhere you look...even inside...people are only...human.

What more do you want? NAOMI

God! JOANNA

Maybe God is only human. NAOMI

That's not what you told us, dammit! Why? Why did you seduce us with the dream of perfection? I don't know if I can ever forgive you for that? JOANNA

Can you forgive yourself? NAOMI

I need that dream, Mother. JOANNA

Having a dream is one thing. Expecting it to come true is another. NAOMI

But the possibility has to be there. What's the point without it? JOANNA

Maybe the point is striving. NAOMI

Are you content with that? JOANNA

Maybe that's all there is. NAOMI

Doesn't that make you angry? I mean all this "striving" with no chance of success. JOANNA

NAOMI

But there is success—in striving well.

JOANNA

But never to reach the goal, never to...arrive.

NAOMI

Oh, I don't know.... Arriving might turn out to be a real bore.

(Beat.)

Like heaven.

(JOANNA smiles in spite of herself. Beat.)

What are you going to do, Love?

JOANNA

I don't know. I just don't know.

NAOMI

How do you feel?

JOANNA

Afraid.

NAOMI

Of what?

JOANNA

That maybe I'm...maybe I'm not fit for anything but the convent.

NAOMI

What do you mean?

JOANNA

That I'm no good at...other things.

NAOMI

At what other things?

JOANNA

At being really close to another human being. I mean, when you think about it, God isn't half as demanding as most people.

NAOMI

"He has placed his seal upon you that you may admit no other lover."

JOANNA

Yes...

(Beat.)

Convenient, isn't it?

(They look at each other. Fade.)

(End of Play)