

The View From Inside the China Cabinet

A ten minute play

By Elliot Nix

CAST

BETTY: Betty is a seventeen year old girl with a feisty temperament and ideals that reflect the growing feminism movement, which she is not afraid of sharing. She is opinionated, especially about her distaste for “girly” clothing and behaviors. She is a lesbian, though no one knows. Her sister is Susan

SUSAN: Susan is an eighteen year old girl with a more withdrawn temperament. She has perfect grades and a stable boyfriend. She always has her hair done and dress ironed, and works hard to keep her southern accent out of her voice. She is asexual, though she doesn't know the term for it.

SETTING:

The play takes place in a department store in Houston, Texas in the late 60's. The girls have been sent here by their mother to buy vanity china for a bridge meeting.

At Rise: The stage is set like the intersection of the fragrance department and home goods section of a department store. The left side of the aisle is the fragrance section, with the right tapering off into silverware and kitchen goods, with a kitchen sink display on the far right of the aisle, directly underneath a "CHECKOUT" sign shaped like an arrow pointing towards stage right.

Lights Up: BETTY and SUSAN enter from stage left, perusing the aisles. SUSAN pays close attention to the shopping, trying to engage BETTY, who is uninterested.

SUSAN

(holding up perfume bottle) Oh, Elizabeth, doesn't this bottle look simply adorable? I bet it smells marvelous.

BETTY

Yeah, I'm sure it's great, Su.

SUSAN

(spritzing the perfume to smell) Honestly, Elizabeth, if I had known you'd just be sulking the entire time, I wouldn't have insisted on bringing you.

BETTY

I'm not sulking, Su, I'm thinking. This place wouldn't be a half bad place to work, actually. Especially now that they have to pay me good, with that new Act and all.

SUSAN

Oh, please keep it down. You know talking about stuff like that can get us in trouble!

BETTY

What? It's the law! They liked it just fine when it was Jim Crow, they can like it just fine now that it's getting girls like us a good paycheck.

SUSAN

(appalled, checking no one heard) Elizabeth! You cannot say things like that in public! Fighting with Dad at home is one thing, but-

BETTY

Doing it here where it might get you in trouble is another? What does it matter, I'm the one that said it. 'Sides, getting Uncle Johnny to gimme a job here is slim enough with Dad fighting me.

SUSAN

Come on. You and I both know you'd hate to work in a department store.

The girls start moving down the aisle again, SUSAN still perusing, BETTY following.

BETTY

Better here than nowhere. Besides, Dad's much more likely to let me get a job selling perfume to little girls and dishes to housewives in Johnny's store than anywhere I really wanna work.

SUSAN

You know he's not going to let you get one anywhere, you two have fought about it enough. So, you really should just let it go and help me pick out the plates Mom sent us for. I brought you so you could help me shop, not so we could fight. We do that enough at home, Elizabeth.

BETTY

Well, *Susan*, you knew I'd talk about getting a job here. I mean, you've been here half the times I've asked for an application. I don't know why you thought it would be any different than any of the other times I talk about getting a job.

SUSAN

Honestly, Elizabeth, can you let the job go? All it takes is for the wrong neighbor to walk down the aisle while you're raving and we're in trouble when we get home...

BETTY

We're already in trouble at home and the neighbors already think I'm a lost cause, I don't care.

SUSAN

I care, so can you please just quiet down and let this go?!

BETTY

Actually, I can't, Su! I'm sick of sitting at home all the time, aren't you? Doing homework the teachers tell us to do, chores that Momma asks us to, staying home like Dad tells us to. It's all so awful I can't stand another minute of it!

SUSAN

Well, maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you'd stop thinking about jobs and try and make our time together a little more enjoyable! We are sisters, you know. We should at least *try* to act like it sometimes, Elizabeth.

BETTY

Come on, Su. You know I'm not gonna stop asking Dad for a job any more than you're gonna stop asking him for a new perfume.

SUSAN

And what, Elizabeth, is so bad about asking for a new perfume?

BETTY

Just the fact that you're starting to become a bottle of the stuff, if you ask me.

SUSAN

(offended) Meaning what, exactly?

BETTY backtracks a bit down the aisle and picks up a bottle of perfume. She holds it up, examining it from different angles dramatically as she speaks her next line.

BETTY

You're just like one, really. Pretty, perfect smelling, only around to make someone else look and feel better. I mean, Dean shows you off like you show all your girlfriends your new bottle of Chanel No. 22.

SUSAN

What on God's green Earth does my boyfriend have to do with this?

BETTY

Not a thing, unless you count the fact that he's more the other half of your suburban post card photo than he is an actual relationship.

SUSAN

Betty, what do you even mean by that?!

BETTY

I mean the two of you are like a couple of dolls. You're too perfect! It's like the whole relationship is all glitter, gloss, and perfume. I mean, how much do you actually know about the boy?

SUSAN freezes as if her response died before spoken. She pauses, fumbling for words as BETTY puts down the perfume and crosses her arms, waiting.

SUSAN

(quietly and defensively) He's going to University in Dallas on a baseball scholarship...

BETTY

Su, if the first thing you think of when you mention the boy you're supposedly in love with is his baseball career, then you don't know him any better than the tanned cowhide of that ball.

SUSAN is without response again, and this time BETTY grows smug.

SUSAN

(flustered) Well, I know lots of things about him that aren't about school or baseball!

BETTY

Uh huh, like what?

SUSAN

(pausing) His favorite color is red!

BETTY

Su, even I knew that, and I've barely ever had a conversation with the boy.

SUSAN

W-well, um, he has a golden retriever named Buddy that he says he loves more than his little brother!

BETTY

Wow, he's really selling himself on this "nice guy" act, innit he?

SUSAN

Oh, that's a joke, Elizabeth and you know it!

BETTY

It's also not the point, Su. If all you know about this boy is his favorite color and that he has a dog he likes, you really shouldn't be dating him.

SUSAN

I do know other things, I just can't recall any right now! Besides, why are you suddenly so invested in my love life, anyway? I never knew you even cared about *any* boys at all, much less the ones I dated.

BETTY

I don't care about boys, and it's not about you dating him, it's about you not knowing *why* you're dating him.

SUSAN

I do know why I'm dating him!

BETTY

Oh, really, then tell me, why are you dating Dean?

SUSAN

(hesitating) Well, he's a good guy, and Mom and Dad like him...

BETTY

I think you just proved my point. "Mom and Dad like it" really shouldn't be the deciding factor of your relationship.

SUSAN

Well, it's not like it's a bad relationship! He treats me nice, takes me out to the diner, he's never raised his voice, he's a great guy!

BETTY

Sounds like you're looking for someone to fill a role, Su, not fall in love with you.

BETTY walks past SUSAN, continuing down the aisle. SUSAN's anger grows and her resolve hardens as she marches to catch up to her sister.

SUSAN

You think you just really know me, huh?

BETTY

I do really know you, Su. You couldn't prove me wrong a single time and it wasn't because you didn't have anything to say, it's because I've been watching too long to not know what I'm talking about.

SUSAN

Well, I've been watching, too, Elizabeth. I've been watching you be unhappy with every part of your life!

BETTY

Oh yeah? How?

SUSAN

Like, with boys, for example. It doesn't matter which one asks you out, you always shoot them down before you even give them a chance!

BETTY

That's because boys ask me out only to show me off like a trophy, the way Dean does you. And I'm not interested, thanks.

SUSAN

(more frustrated) Well, that still doesn't explain your issues with school!

BETTY

And what issues do I have with school?

SUSAN

It doesn't matter what class it is, you always have a problem with the teachers.

BETTY

That's because the teachers are always trying to control every little thing I do, even the way I do my work for them!

SUSAN

Those are called *rules*, Elizabeth! They're there for a reason.

BETTY

Maybe that's what they are in school, but I still don't like the way our parents do it, too.

SUSAN

Those are still just rules, Elizabeth. They're there for a reason, too, it's just different reasons.

BETTY

No, they're called control complexes, Susan, and they have no place in my life.

SUSAN

Control complexes? What on Earth do you mean by that?

BETTY

I mean, they're obsessed with making sure we follow every one of their rules so we're the perfect little picture.. Honestly, Susan, do you think Dad would have an issue with me getting a job if I was a boy? Hell, he'd probably help me hunt one!

SUSAN

Okay, but you're not, so he's never gonna give in, so why can you not let it go when holding on makes your life harder? I mean, I've been watching you gripe and complain about wanting a job like it's the only thing that matters in the world for months!

BETTY jerks slightly back, tensing.

BETTY

You have, huh? Well, did you ever think to wonder why? Do you understand why I want a job so damn bad?

SUSAN

No, Elizabeth, for the life of me, I can't understand. And I don't see how I could, because you never give anyone a chance in the world to understand you!

BETTY

Oh, who is *trying* to understand me, Susan?

SUSAN

Me for one. Believe it or not, I'm trying to actually get to know you. And Mom and Dad, too.

BETTY

Oh, please. Momma doesn't try to understand anything that isn't her home decor or her bridge club and Dad doesn't want to know anything except how to get me to do what he wants, same as everyone.

SUSAN

And what about what he wants is so bad, Elizabeth? What is he asking of you except to maybe *try* to be a little prettier or nicer?

BETTY

Prettier and Nicer? I don't *want* to be "pretty" or "nice", Susan! I hate the idea of being either, of being some perfect, pretty little made up thing the way he wants. You might be happy being the nice little girl who lives on Sycamore Street and makes the boys swoon and requires nothing more than a bouquet of roses to settle down and have a perfect little family of blue eyed children with some strapping beau from the next suburb over, but I'm not! I don't want that life, a life like a piece of fine china Mom keeps in her cabinets. Yes, it's pretty with its hand painted designs and its fragileness, but what is it *good for?! To be taken out only to be dusted every few years, only to be put back into the safe little cabinet to be admired forevermore? To sit there and do nothing but look pretty until some child eventually knocks the cupboard over and shatters it on the dining room floor? That's not me, Su, and you know it! I want to be the plates Mom keeps in the kitchen cabinet, that she gets out when it's just us and no guests. The ones that know what it is like to be used, to be valued, to be alive. The plates that know the weight of one of Dad's ribeye or a square of Aunt Carol's lasagna, the plates that have fork and knife marks because they're familiar with the sound of scraping cutlery, the plates that have been dropped on the kitchen floor, and cracked, and lived. The plates that have been washed and cared for and used. I want to actually *live* my life, Su. I want to know what it feels like to be someone when my time comes and I shatter on the linoleum!*

SUSAN is silent after BETTY's words, unsure of how to respond. When she does, she's much gentler.

SUSAN

Elizabeth, I...I had no idea that was how you felt. I just thought that, well, I don't know, that-

BETTY

That I was some stubborn brat who only wanted the job to get some time away from my controlling family and my perfect, golden child of a sister? Don't worry, you're not the only one who thinks that way.

SUSAN

No, Elizabeth, that's not it, either. I'm not sure what I thought but it wasn't- wait. Is that really what you think of me, some perfect "golden child"?

BETTY

It's kinda hard not to, Su. Perfect grades, perfect boyfriend, different perfect dress everyday. Hell, even a perfect relationship with our parents, something I could never do.

SUSAN

Oh, Elizabeth, if you think I've been trying all this time to be "perfect" to be better than you, then you really don't know me. I'm not some plate of fine china because I like being kept in our parent's dusty cabinet, I paint myself like fine china because it makes me feel like I have some control. I get to choose how I look every day; and if I choose to look beautiful, then that means I get to control how the boys at school look at me. If I choose to get good grades, then I get to choose how the teachers at school talk to me. If I choose to do what they ask, then I get to control how our parents treat me. I don't live the way I do, want the life I want, because I desire to be some made up plate of fine china to be admired. I live the way I live because that means that I get safety, and on those special occasions, in those godsent moments, like when Mom's club comes over and she pulls out that fine china, I get to be appreciated and admired, and I'm still safe because I'm handled with care. I don't want to be pretty on my pedestal, Elizabeth, I want to be pretty safe on my pedestal. I want to live and be used for my life's meals, too, just like you. I'm just not brave enough to be dropped.

BETTY is silent, slightly surprised.

BETTY

(quietly) I guess we really *don't* know each other, huh?

SUSAN

How could we? We never stopped making assumptions long enough to give each other the chance.

BETTY

Well...how do we, now that we want to? I mean, we do want to...right?

SUSAN

Yeah, I think we do. And, for getting started...why don't we just shop for Momma's plates together?

BETTY

Shoot, you're right! Dad will be back from the hardware store to pick us up soon, and we haven't even started. Come on, Su, let's get to shopping.

BETTY takes SUSAN's hand and runs them the short distance left to the vanity plate display. The girls both choose different sets at first, going back and forth over which one

would be better, playfully bickering until they finally point to the same set, BETTY pointing first. They look at each other and laugh.

BETTY

Wow, we finally agreed on something!

SUSAN

(sarcastically) Well, I 'spose miracles do still happen.

BETTY

Hey, I was right, and you agreed. If that ain't proof of miracles, I don't know what is.

The girls laugh, picking up the plates and walking to the end of the aisle and the exit.

SUSAN

You were right, though. About some other things, too.

BETTY

Yeah? About what?

SUSAN

About...about Dean.

BETTY

Meaning?

SUSAN

I don't love him, not really. At least, not in the way I think I'm supposed to.

BETTY

Well, you don't have to, Su. He's not the only boy that'll come along. There will be other people to love.

SUSAN

That's just the thing, Eliza- Betty. I'm not sure I can ever see myself loving *anyone* the way I'm supposed to. I'm not sure I have it in me, to become someone's girlfriend or wife, not really.

BETTY

Well, then you just don't have it in you. Ya' know, despite what all these *New York Magazine* articles tell you, you don't have to have a man to be happy in life, Su. You can just be you, not Mrs. anyone.

SUSAN

(tearful) Oh, thank you, Betty. I-I just never thought I could even tell anyone, and-

BETTY soothingly shushes her sister, bringing her in for a hug as SUSAN fights not to cry.

BETTY

It's okay, Su. You never have to worry about being scared to tell anyone anything again. That's what sisters are for, sharing everything.

SUSAN

I'm so glad you think that way. I've wanted us to be that way for so long.

BETTY

Well, better late than never, I suppose.

SUSAN

Betty, I'm sorry I never tried before to understand you. I think I do now, and I'm glad I tried.

BETTY

Aw, s'okay, Su. I never really tried to understand you, either, and that's just as bad. We both never gave each other a chance.

SUSAN

(Taking BETTY's hand) Well, thank God we finally did.

BETTY

Speaking of chances, I'm off to take one. You go ahead and check out with those plates, I'll meet you at the exit.

SUSAN

Where are you going?

BETTY

To ask uncle Johnny for another job application. Dad might actually go for it when he sees how well the two of us get along now. That was always one of his biggest objections, and if I explain why I want it...

BETTY gives a reassuring smile as she turns to walk away. SUSAN catches her arm.

SUSAN

Wait! You might as well go ahead and let me checkout so I can ask for one, too.

BETTY

(shocked) You want to get a job with me?!

SUSAN

Well, Dad is much more likely to say yes if we both ask. (*joking*) Besides, staying home and reading *Chronicles of Narnia* won't be nearly as fun without you there reading *The Feminine Mystique* next to me.

BETTY

You pay attention to what I'm reading?

SUSAN

And that you shove it under your pillow when Dad comes in to check on us. Told you I paid attention, too. Now, we'd better hurry if we're gonna fill out those applications before Dad gets back.

BETTY grabs SUSAN and jumps up and down excitedly before dragging her along.

BETTY

Ah, Su, I can't believe you're doing this with me! Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go!

SUSAN

Woah, slow down! Equal pay laws don't expire, but my arm *can* come off.

BETTY

Oh, please. Like you're not just excited to get that perfume that Dad won't buy you!

SUSAN

Not true! I want to spend time with my newly friendly sister. But, the discount on it would be nice...

Curtain Down