



PLACEMENT

More commonly known as a seating plan

Can you remember how it felt being picked last for the sports team? Just standing, waiting awkwardly as everyone else was chosen? I get that slightly sickly feeling when I go to a dinner and realize the seating is freestyle, wondering if I can get away with sitting next to David or saving a seat for the only other friend I might find there. Of course, neither are acceptable. At all. You only get to sit next to your other half during the time you are engaged. After that, it's a no-no. I sigh in relief when I spy a placement (pronounced the French way, with a slow, exaggerated emphasis on each syllable: plaaacement), spot place cards, or am directed by a helpful hostess to the chair she has designated for me.

So when it comes to my own dinners, yessss, I like to have a seating plan to ensure no one ever feels like he or she is standing on the edge of that sports field waiting and waiting. Traditionally you will place the most important woman on the right of the host and vice versa, with the most important man on the hostess's right, but I like to keep things as informal as possible and will often swap seats with another guest after the main course, so that formal-hierarchy nonsense gets a bit more smoothed over. Unless, that is, I see neighbors deep in a riveting conversation or old friends reconnecting or guests simply enjoying one another's company. Then I leave the whole damn thing alone, because it's working.

Once when we had Lenny Kravitz come over for supper, we ate in the kitchen—no formalities, no seating plan—but I wondered afterward if it might have helped my mother for there to have been a place card with his name on it. “Who was that nice man?” she asked. “Was I right in hearing his name was Zinny Crayfish?” It got even weirder when Lenny wandered into the TV room to find my boys playing Guitar Hero, which was the hot new commodity. “Can I have a go?” asked Lenny, picking up a plastic guitar and starting to strum. Felix, then aged around ten, pointed out to Lenny that he was actually one of the computerized “heroes” on the screen. Lenny was playing Lenny.

OPPOSITE: I have an overstock of postcards, luggage labels, and pebbles from the beach, so our place cards can be fairly bonkers. They're normally written on my hands and knees, but sometimes they're taken more seriously and calligraphed by a professional, or a daughter with a pinch of glitter and a secret message inside.