

INDEPENDENCE was given its professional premiere by the Actors Theatre of Louisville during its Eighth Annual Humana Festival of New American Plays in February 1984. It was directed by Patrick Tovatt; the scenery was designed by Paul Owen; the costumes were designed by Geoffrey T. Cunningham; and the sound design was by James M. Bay. The cast was as follows:

JO Shelley Crandall
KESS Deborah Hedwall
SHERRY Gretchen West
EVELYN Sylvia Gassell

CHARACTERS

EVELYN BRIGGS: 53
KESS: her daughter, 33
JO: her daughter, 25
SHERRY: her daughter, 19

TIME: Late May. The present.

PLACE: Independence, Iowa.

ACT ONE

Scene 1 Late Thursday afternoon
Scene 2 Saturday morning, two days later
Scene 3 The same day, around noon
Scene 4 Sunday evening, the next day

ACT TWO

Scene 1 Thursday evening, four days later
Scene 2 Friday afternoon, the next day
Scene 3 Late, the same night
Scene 4 Saturday afternoon, the next day
Scene 5 Sunday morning, the next day

ACT ONE

Scene One

Interior of an old frame house. Downstage is the living room, Upstage is the front porch. The effect should be of a dark room in the foreground, backed by the bright afternoon sunlight coming through the porch. Right is a door to SHERRY'S room. Left, a door to the kitchen. Up Right, a hallway leads upstairs. Up Left, an archway leading to the dining room. The living room is filled with old-fashioned furniture: a couch, overstuffed chairs, etc. Well kept up.

After a moment, JO comes through the screen door, onto the porch. She wears an orthopedic collar. KESS follows, carrying a travel bag.

JO: I can't believe it! You look incredible, you're so tan. How do you get so tan in Minneapolis?

KESS: Jo, shouldn't you be lying down?

JO: Oh, I'm fine. Here, let me take your bag . . .

KESS: That's OK. I've got it . . .

JO: *(Entering the living room.)* Well, come on in. Take a look at the old place. What do you think? After four years.

KESS: *(Remaining on the threshold.)* I think you should be lying down.

JO: Don't worry. This is my last day to wear this. The doctor said I'm fine if I don't move fast.

KESS: On the phone you said it was an emergency.

the street goes down? It's a six-foot drop from the sidewalk, and . . . she pushed me.

KUSS: You said she hit you.

JO: She did hit me, but it was like a push. I mean, I fell over backwards. On my neck. I was almost hit by a Plymouth. I didn't wake up for a couple of minutes.

KUSS: Did they see it? The person in the Plymouth?

JO: No, they were coming around the corner.

KUSS: Did anybody see it?

JO: No, it was Sunday. The stores were closed. But it happened.

KUSS: Why would Mom hit you?

JO: Because I'm pregnant. (*A beat.*) How do you like the house? We painted it last year. (*Kuss moves to a chair, puts down her bag, but remains standing.*)

KUSS: It's great to be home. I can only stay a couple days. I'm teaching three different courses . . .

JO: I don't expect you to stay long—honest. I just need you to be here awhile, for support. I need help with Mom, and . . . things. You know Mom.

KUSS: Yes, I know Mom.

JO: I need you to . . . stand up to her. You know—like last time.

KUSS: Last time I committed her for three months. Is that what you're talking about?

JO: Oh, no—no, no, no, no, no, no. No. I don't mean that. I just mean having you back would . . . help so much. You know, having *all* her daughters here for once, for her to . . .

KUSS: Contend with.

JO: It is an emergency.

KESS: You said you were laid up. I came down because I thought you couldn't get out of bed.

JO: I have been laid up. It's just that . . .

KESS: What do you mean? You're waltzing all over the room. If you've only got a minor injury . . .

JO: I broke my neck. Well . . . I chipped it. One of those little bones back there. The doctor said I could have been paralyzed for life. Really. I could have died. (*Of the collar.*) I've had to wear this for a week, I strained the muscles so bad.

KESS: You made me leave my work—you made me drive for hours—because you chipped your neck?

JO: Well . . . yes.

KESS: Why?

JO: Are you going to come in or not? (*KESS turns to go.*) Kess! That's not funny. (*KESS stops, looks at her.*) Please come in. (*KESS enters, stands uncomfortably in the room.*)

KESS: How'd you get hurt? (*A beat.* KESS turns again for the door.)

JO: Someone tried to kill me.

KESS: Kill you? Who?

JO: Mom.

KESS: Mom tried to . . . ? Why didn't you tell me on the phone?

JO: I couldn't say it over the phone . . .

KESS: She tried to *kill* you?

JO: Well, yes . . . in a way. She hit me. And I fell. I fell six feet. Into the street. You know—over by Duman's Drug? Where

JO: No, to . . . love. (SHERRY enters from her room with a makeup kit.)

SHERRY: Hey, is that big sister?

JO: Sherry—thought you were taking a shower.

SHERRY: I will tomorrow. (Setting up a mirror, taking her brush out of the kit.) Hi, Kess. How're you? Hope you don't mind if I do this while I say hello. I have to go to work. Nice to see you. (She begins doing her makeup.)

KESS: Nice to see you.

SHERRY: How you been the last four years?

KESS: Fine. You?

SHERRY: I'm getting out of school in a couple weeks. At long last. Would you believe it?

KESS: You look different.

SHERRY: I hope so, Christ, I was fifteen the last time you saw me. You just here for the day?

KESS: Well . . .

SHERRY: Stay long enough to catch Mom's act. She's really been lighting up the place lately. Ever since Jo got knocked up. Same routine as with me. Something about unmarried pregnant daughters just rings her bell. Check her out. She'll be back from work in a little while.

JO: (Moving toward the kitchen.) Kess, why don't we . . .

KESS: I didn't know she worked.

SHERRY: (Laughs.) Oh, yeah. She volunteers out at the MHI.

KESS: Since when?

SHERRY: Almost a year. Jo got her the job. Didn't you write her about that, Jo? Mom's like this model volunteer out there.

and leave Mom all alone? He's not going to live with her, you know.

SHERRY: He's not completely stupid.

JO: Besides, I think he was just . . . offering. You know, 'cause he felt he had to. (SHERRY has pulled hair out of her brush and thrown it on the floor. KESS bends to pick it up.)

SHERRY: What are you doing?

KESS: Just . . .

SHERRY: Are you picking up after me?

KESS: You threw hair on the floor.

SHERRY: Put it back. (KESS hesitates, then does so.) I have a mother for that. So, anyway—like I say, now Jo's alone and pregnant, and there's this marksman walking around town, beginning to look for other targets.

JO: Sherry.

SHERRY: Well, he is. You know who he's showing up at Popeye's with now?

JO: Who?

SHERRY: You want to go insane? Heidi Joy Duckly.

JO: You're kidding.

SHERRY: Nope. Heidi Joy. (To KESS.) She's this blonde dwarf you wouldn't believe. I mean, Don was never too inventive, but Heidi. You know what Heidi once said to me out loud? "Women should never complain—that's the man's job." Really, I could've strangled the bitch. (KESS has by now walked up to the front windows, and looks out.) So what do you think of Jo's life? Screwed up, huh? And I thought I was in trouble when I had a kid . . .

JO: (To SHERRY.) You should have let me tell her about Don.

SHERRY: You would've taken all day. Hey, Kess. You like my hair this way?

KESS: What? Oh . . . sure.

SHERRY: You're not even looking. What are you looking at?

KESS: The traffic light.

SHERRY: *The* traffic light. That's about it. Independence, Iowa.

KESS: Same houses. Even the same billboards.

SHERRY: Only so many ways to sell herbicide. I'll be out of here so fast when I graduate. I'm nineteen years old and still in high school. That's the real cost of illegitimate kids, believe me. Jo, you were smart to wait.

KESS: I can see the MHI from here.

SHERRY: Second home to the demented of northeast Iowa. And I do mean Mom and Jo.

JO: Sherry . . .

SHERRY: (*Rising, after packing up her kit.*) I don't mean it. Just that anybody who works out there is bound to bring some of it home with her.

JO: I work in accounts. I never go near the patients.

KESS: (*Looking off to the side.*) Mrs. Anderberg's collection has grown.

SHERRY: Yeah. Lawn Ornament Land. She must have twenty of 'em out there. All the Iowa standards: stable boys, little fawns, sleeping Mexicans . . . Hey! You know what? I could use those in a sculpture, I bet. You know—just mush 'em all together some way? Shit, what a great idea. I wonder if I could buy some of them off her tomorrow? I'm an artist.

KESS: Oh? That's nice.

SHERRY: No, really. I won a thing at school. I'm a killer. Even my teacher thinks so.

KESS: That's excellent. I'm impressed.

SHERRY: "That's excellent. I'm impressed." Same old Kess.

JO: Sherry, aren't you late for work?

SHERRY: Don't you wish. Mom and Jo are officially ashamed of me, now that I'm a barmaid at Popeye's.

KESS: Popeye's? Doesn't the school get mad?

SHERRY: Nah. They're too desperate to get rid of me. I graduate in three weeks. (*Taking her kit into her room.*) Hey, how do you like this? I moved downstairs. It's not exactly a separate apartment, but almost. I still think my big mistake was not getting a separate apartment at birth.

KESS: Sherry?

SHERRY: (*Off*) What?

KESS: How do you think Mom's doing?

SHERRY: (*Returning with a light jacket.*) Oh, fine. Never better. Last night she threw her shoe at my boyfriend. We were sitting in the den, watching TV. Mom was in there, sewing. Me and this guy were hugging and shit—nothing special. Suddenly she chucked her loafer at him. Then she went back to sewing, no explanation. She's great.

KESS: How did Jo get hurt?

JO: I told you . . .

SHERRY: Mom shoved her off the sidewalk or something, I don't know. Something lame like that. Hey, I gotta go work. Pop-eye's is sleazy, but it's all money. (*She moves toward the front door.*) Tell me about yourself sometime. See you later. 'Night. (*Stops again.*) This place seem any different to you?

KESS: Yes. A little.

SHERRY: It's not. *(She exits out the front door.)*

KESS: Well. She sure hasn't changed, has she?

JO: Not much. *(JO picks up the hair on the floor, disposes of it.)*

KESS: So. Mom is not happy.

JO: She's been terrible. Even after I told her I wasn't going to marry Don—that I was going to stay here. She acts like she doesn't believe me.

KESS: Do you think about leaving her?

JO: I couldn't leave her.

KESS: I did.

JO: You're you. You could do that.

KESS: Everyone does that. People grow up. They leave home. *(During JO's next speech, EVELYN appears unnoticed in the dining room. She wears a coat. She stops when she sees KESS.)*

JO: They don't leave homes like this one. Mom needs more help than other people. She needs someone to be here. Steadily.

KESS: You, you mean?

JO: Well, yes me. If no one else is going to do it. *(A beat.)* I'm sorry. She still hasn't forgiven you, you know.

EVELYN: *(Moving into the living room.)* Who says I haven't forgiven her?

JO: Mom!

EVELYN: It's silly to say that I haven't forgiven Kess. Where did you get that idea?

JO: Well . . . you said . . .

EVELYN: *(Coming to KESS.)* I can't tell you how surprised I felt

when Jo told me you were coming. I hope you'll feel comfortable here.

KESS: Thanks.

EVELYN: Do you want some tea?

KESS: No, thanks.

EVELYN: No? Coffee? Anything?

KESS: No.

EVELYN: Well, I'd like some tea. Jo, why don't you be good and make us some, all right? The way we like it?

JO: Oh . . . um, ok. (*She exits to the kitchen.*)

EVELYN: Have a seat.

KESS: In a minute.

EVELYN: (*Sitting near KESS's bag.*) I will. I've been standing for hours. Out at the MHI. I work in the craft center, you know.

KESS: I heard.

EVELYN: I thought you'd be interested, since you were the one who brought me out there in the first place. Of course, now I'm helping other people, instead of being helped. They all like the projects I think up. Just simple things, really. Wood and yarn and paint and things. (*EVELYN opens KESS's bag and rummages inside.*) How long are you staying? Did you bring a lot with you?

KESS: What are you doing?

EVELYN: Looking at your things. (*Holding up a book.*) What's this book? It's awfully thick.

KESS: It's a study of imagery in seventeenth-century Scottish Border Ballads.

EVELYN: What do you use it for? Do you read it?

KESS: I'm writing a book of my own.

EVELYN: Really? What's your book called?

KESS: "Imagery in Seventeenth-Century Scottish Border Ballads."

EVELYN: Isn't that the same thing?

KESS: It's my view.

EVELYN: (*Laughs, continues rummaging.*) I'll never understand it.

KESS: Mom, why are you going through my things?

EVELYN: I haven't seen you. I'm trying to get an idea of who you are. How you've changed, I mean.

KESS: (*Retrieving her bag, moving it away from her.*) I haven't.

EVELYN: You came back. How long are you staying?

KESS: Jo and I are still talking that one over.

EVELYN: I hope you stay a long time. It's exciting to have all you girls together again. It's a rare treat.

KESS: Jo said you tried to kill her.

EVELYN: Why don't you sit down?

KESS: I'll sit down when I want to sit down.

EVELYN: Are you afraid to sit down? (*A beat. KESS sits in a chair.*) You always used to sit there. (*KESS immediately rises.*) It's so hard to know what to start talking about after four years, isn't it? Are you still a homosexual?

KESS: (*A beat.*) Yes, Mother. I am still a homosexual.

EVELYN: I suppose that'll make it hard for you to give Jo much advice about this Don Orbeck fellow. She's awfully confused right now. She wanted to marry him, but I think I've pointed out the disadvantages of *that*.

KESS: What are they?

EVELYN: Oh—well, everyone counsels against getting married because of an inadvertent pregnancy. I mean, look at my own life. I married Henry Briggs just because we were expecting you, and that didn't work out so wonderfully, did it?

KESS: I guess not.

EVELYN: What is it about the women in this family? We get near a man, and the next thing we know we're pregnant. You're probably right to stay away from men.

KESS: Mom . . .

EVELYN: Are you sure you don't want to sit? I feel like I'm starting up at a big building.

KESS: I'll stand.

EVELYN: I hope you won't do any homosexual things while you're in town. I mean, it's your life, but . . .

KESS: (*Moving toward the kitchen.*) I wonder if Jo needs help?

EVELYN: Oh, she's gone down to the bakery for some rolls.

KESS: She has?

EVELYN: She always does when she makes tea. It's one of our little sins.

KESS: (*Sighs, perches on the back of a chair.*) Oh.

EVELYN: It's been so long since we've talked. I admit, I wished you dead there for a couple of years, but I'm over that now.

KESS: Mom . . .

EVELYN: Jo's almost fully recovered, too. From her neck, I mean. So, I guess you'd say we're all doing very well at the . . .

KESS: Mom, can I say something?

EVELYN: Of course. We're having a talk.

KESS: As I was driving down here, I was talking to myself—I was saying, “Mom’s had four years. We both have. Four years of not seeing each other, not talking, not even writing. Maybe things are entirely different by now. Maybe we’ll actually find that we’ve forgotten how we used to talk to each other. Maybe we’ll invent a whole new way.”

EVELYN: You talk to yourself in the car?

KESS: Why do we get into conversations like this? Can’t you just say, “Hello, Kess—it’s nice to see you again”?

EVELYN: No.

KESS: Why not?

EVELYN: Because it isn’t.

KESS: (*A beat.*) Why not?

EVELYN: Isn’t it obvious? You left this family long ago. You never visited, you never told us anything about your life . . .

KESS: I was trying to establish something for myself.

EVELYN: And then, four years ago, out of the blue, you came down here and decided I needed medical help.

KESS: You did.

EVELYN: In your opinion.

KESS: I found you sitting on the floor behind a chair, wrapped in a blanket.

EVELYN: And you gave me a hug. I remember; it was very sweet. Then you took me out to the MHI, and . . .

KESS: What did you want me to do? Take you up to Minneapolis with me? You wouldn’t go. Quit my job? Move down here?

EVELYN: That could have been a start.

KESS: I’m a professional! I have a career. It takes all my time and

energy—all my love to do it well. I'm not a hack teacher somewhere. I'm extremely good at what I do.

EVELYN: I know, dear. You're a specialist.

KESS: You were only in there three months.

EVELYN: How much love would you like, Kess?

KESS: What?

EVELYN: Isn't that what we're talking about? Really? You're not here for Jo. You're here for love. You want some of my love.

KESS: That would be nice.

EVELYN: Well then, it occurs to me we may only be dickering about the amount. You're a specialist; maybe you don't need a lot of love from me. Maybe you only need a tiny bit. I think I could provide that.

KESS: Why did you try to kill Jo?

EVELYN: I didn't. I hit her.

KESS: She thinks you tried to . . .

EVELYN: You show me one mother who hasn't hit a child.

KESS: (*A beat.*) Well. I'm going to be here for a little while. I think Jo and Sherry could use whatever comfort and protection that would afford.

EVELYN: They do not need protection . . .

KESS: I think they do. I think they need that, and love.

EVELYN: You are just like Henry Briggs, you know that? Only here when you want to create new tragedies.

KESS: Mom . . .

EVELYN: You have all his false appeal and his seeming logic. But

just like Henry, you become part of this family only when it suits you, and . . .

KESS: Mother . . .

EVELYN: And one day you will leave for good. Won't you? Won't you?

KESS: Why did you hit Jo?

EVELYN: I never hit Jo! (*Rising*) I remember when a mother and daughter could converse like human beings about these things. You ask anybody in Independence about me. They'll say Evelyn Briggs is the sanest, most well-loved one among us. I am wonderful with those patients. I don't know what Jo may have told you, but it's . . .

KESS: (*Overlapping from "may."*) Jo has only been . . .

EVELYN: But it's not true! I am perfectly capable of functioning in a warm and loving universe. Which is what I try constantly to create!

JO: (*From off, in the kitchen.*) Mom! I'm back. I got your favorite! Cinnamon rolls!

EVELYN: I'd better go help Jo. Hope you like Constant Comment. (*She exits into the kitchen. KESS looks around the room, sighs and slumps on the arm of the couch. Lights fade to black.*)

She made the local paper and everything. "Former Mental Patient Now Helps Others At Mental Health Institute." You know, one of those articles that makes you feel ten feet tall 'n shit? *Look* at this hair of mine. I gotta work tonight.

KESS: (*To Jo.*) Mom's working with mental patients?

SHERRY: Don't worry. She won't hurt 'em. She's just in the craft center. They don't let her alone with anybody.

JO: She wanted to. I couldn't say no.

SHERRY: Hey, what do you think of the pregnant one here? She tell you all about it?

KESS: Not yet.

SHERRY: It's really ridiculous, believe me. I'm sorry, Jo, but it is.

I mean, imagine this: Jo, who's been a virgin practically since pioneer days, finally decided to go out with someone. Did she write you about that? So guess what? She goes out with him and goes out with him. And in the course of human events, she gets pregnant.

JO: His name is Don Orbeck.

SHERRY: Deadeye Don Orbeck.

KESS: (*To Jo.*) Well, what's he like?

SHERRY: He's got a Subaru—that's about it. So anyhow, he offers to marry Jo . . .

KESS: He wants to marry you?

SHERRY: *Did* want to. Jo said no.

KESS: You didn't want to marry him?

SHERRY: She turned him down.

JO: It would have been selfish. (*They look at her.*) To marry him