

PLAYS FOR
ACTRESSES

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*To Jeanne Blake,
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Theater Center,
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ACT II
Scene Four

Afternoon, the next day. No one is onstage. JO rushes in the front door.

JO: Kess? Kess!?

KESS: (*Off.*) I'm upstairs!

JO: Can you come down?

KESS: (*Off.*) In a minute. (*JO looks around the room, goes to SHERRY'S door, looks in.*)

JO: Sherry? You home? (*No response. JO stands nervously.*) Kess!

KESS: (*Off.*) I'm coming, I'm coming! (*KESS enters from upstairs.*)
What's wrong?

JO: Where were you?

KESS: Upstairs.

JO: Nobody seemed to be here.

KESS: What's wrong?

JO: Where's Mom?

KESS: She's at the store.

JO: Where's Sherry?

KESS: With Mom. Jo, what are you . . . ?

JO: So, they're not here.

KESS: (*A beat.*) Jo, where have you been all morning?

JO: On an errand.

KESS: A four-hour errand?

JO: I had to go over to Waterloo. (*A beat.*) Kess, do you remember when you asked me to come up and stay with you?

KESS: Yes.

JO: Did you mean that?

KESS: Well . . . yes, at the time . . .

JO: I want to come up. I want to come up right now.

KESS: Now?

JO: Yes. And I want to stay. I want to stay for the summer at least, maybe a lot longer.

KESS: Jo, what are you talking about?

JO: I want to come up. You said I could come up. You said that roommate of yours, that . . .

KESS: Susan.

JO: You said Susan thinks it's OK.

KESS: Well, yes, but . . . why now?

JO: I have to get away from Mom.

KESS: What'd she do?

JO: Nothing.

KESS: (*A beat.*) Yesterday you and Mom were planning which room to use for the nursery. What happened? Why are you so scared?

JO: I just did a . . . very odd thing. I went over to Heidi's house. I thought I was only going over to talk with her. Just to . . . look her in the eye once, and ask her if she really slept with Don while he and I were . . . you know, like Sherry said . . .

KESS: I know.

JO: But as I turned the corner I saw her pull out and drive away. So I followed her.

KESS: To Waterloo? (*JO nods.*) What did you do there?

JO: I watched. I watched the way she drove. I watched the way she shopped. She hit all the bridal shops, plus a few others. She's a good shopper.

KESS: Did she see you?

JO: No. I hid. I stayed two cars behind her, like on TV, and I hid behind pillars in the stores. I never lost her. I stared at her and stared at her for four hours, and she never saw me and I never lost her. I didn't want to talk with her anymore. I just wanted to watch her. On the way home, I thought, "My God, why am I doing this!?" But I just kept following, I thought, "*Mom* should be driving this car. I should be *Mom* doing this." Then I thought, "I am." Kess, I love Mom.

KESS: I know that.

JO: I thought of how I'll be in ten years, if I stay with Mom. Kess, I can't be Mom. How can I help her if I'm just like her?

KESS: Jo . . .

JO: I want to leave tomorrow. And I want to stay with you. Is that all right?

KESS: Well . . . I'm not sure that's the best idea anymore.

JO: *Kess . . .*

KESS: Jo, we can't leave Mom the way she is. I thought we could, but that was before I saw how lonely she was . . .

JO: I don't care . . .

KESS: Besides, she could hurt herself. That's why I've stayed down here so long—to make sure she's all right.

JO: She's all right; let's go.

KESS: She's not all right.

JO: She never will be!

KESS: Jo, what if I stay down here another few days, and then come back on regular visits, once a month, for as long as . . . for as long as it takes? Could you stay here then?

JO: No! I'm coming up north, and I'm living with you. You offered it. And I need it.

KESS: Jo . . .

JO: You owe me! (*A beat.*) I don't care how guilty you feel, Kess. I don't. We can't save Mom. Save me. (*We suddenly hear SHERRY and EVELYN at the front door.*)

SHERRY: Here we are—Shoppers Anonymous. (*Entering.*) Hi, everybody. It's everybody else. Where'd you go this morning, Jo? Somewhere fun?

JO: No.

SHERRY: (*Carrying the bag into the kitchen.*) Should've come with us. The store was full of living sculptures.

EVELYN: (*At the screen door, with a bag of groceries.*) Can someone help me with the door?

KESS: (*Hurrying to open it.*) Oh—sorry.

EVELYN: Thank you. Hi, Jo. Did you have a good morning? Oh, let me set these *down*. (*Doing so, on the couch.*) There. Why is modern food so heavy? Sherry and I decided to have a big dinner tonight, for Kess. We haven't really done that yet, and Kess is starting to fit in so well.

SHERRY: (*Reentering, to KESS.*) Yeah. Are you sure you're not crazy?

EVELYN: Jo, do you want to help me cook it?

JO: No.

EVELYN: Oh? Are you busy tonight?

JO: No.

EVELYN: (*A beat.*) Oh. Well, maybe you can, Kess.

JO: She can't either.

EVELYN: Why not?

KESS: Jo, this isn't the right time . . .

JO: She'll be packing. So will I.

EVELYN: Packing? What for?

JO: I'm going to Minneapolis with her.

EVELYN: (*A beat.*) Really?

JO: Yes.

EVELYN: I don't understand. You mean for a visit?

JO: No.

EVELYN: For longer?

JO: Forever.

EVELYN: (*A beat.*) You're pregnant. You can't travel.

JO: Two and a half months. We're not going by covered wagon.

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KESS: Jo . . .

EVELYN: Oh, this is a joke. Isn't it? You and Kess have created a joke. Oh, I see now. Well, it's very funny. *(She takes an orange out of the bag.)* Isn't this a joke, Kess?

KESS: No, not exactly . . .

JO: Mom, I've been following Heidi around.

EVELYN: Following Heidi? What for?

JO: Just to watch her. Just to watch what she does all day.

SHERRY: That must be a thrill.

JO: I couldn't help myself. I just followed her.

EVELYN: We all have impulses that are hard to control. *(She tosses the orange casually onto the couch.)*

JO: I'm afraid I'll go crazy.

EVELYN: *(Flaring.)* What in hell do you know about it?! I've been in mental hospitals!

JO: I was only . . .

EVELYN: You were only trying to sneak out of here! In the dust of everybody else galloping away! *(She tosses another orange onto the couch.)*

SHERRY: Mom, what are you doing?

EVELYN: What?

SHERRY: You're putting oranges on the couch.

EVELYN: Well, of course I'm putting oranges on the couch! This is my house. People used to live in it. *(A beat.)* Who's going to stay here?

JO: Well . . . Sherry . . .

EVELYN: She'll be out the door twenty seconds after commencement.

JO: Kess says she'll visit . . .

EVELYN: Who'll live here?

JO: When I followed Heidi, I even followed her home. I did. I sat in my car and watched her mother come out and help her bring in the things she'd bought. They were laughing. They looked like sisters.

EVELYN: Jo . . .

Softer, pleading
JO: You're crazy! And when you're not crazy, you're angry. When you're not angry, you're demanding. It can be months between times we have any pleasure!

EVELYN: Jo . . .

JO: I'm the only person who has ever put up with you!

EVELYN: *(Reaching to embrace her.)* Jo . . .

JO: *(Retreating.)* No! I'm living with Kess. I have to. I have to.

Angry
EVELYN: *(A beat.)* You can't. You can't, and that's all there is to it. It's a ridiculous idea. Kess, was this your idea?

KESS: No . . .

EVELYN: Jo could never live with you. She's going to have a baby.

KESS: What are you talking about?

EVELYN: You could never live with a baby.

KESS: Of course I could live with a baby.

EVELYN: You don't know the first thing. You'd panic in a minute.

KESS: I can live with a baby!

EVELYN: You don't know what they want!

JO: It's my baby!

sharp

EVELYN: You shut up! I'm talking to Kess.

KESS: Mom, what if Jo just comes up for a little while? Just to see how it goes?

JO: No.

KESS: We could come down on visits.

JO: No!

pained

EVELYN: Do you really want to take her from me?

JO: I'm going!

KESS: I don't want to take anybody from anybody . . .

accusatory

EVELYN: Well, that's what you're doing. You girls would like a world full of strangers, wouldn't you? You'd like it if there was no connection between people at all. (Focusing on JO.) Well, there isn't. Not unless you make one. Kess and Henry taught me that. They were the two most silent people I ever knew. For eight years they were my whole family. Henry and Kess. Can you imagine what dinners were like? I had to beg Henry for you. You were all I ever got out of my whole family. You're the only one I can look at and not see Henry.

angry

JO: (Backing away.) I can't help you.

again pleading

EVELYN: Then who can?

JO: I can't help you.

EVELYN: I just need you to be here a little more. Just a few days.

JO: I can't! I can't help you, I can't be with you, I can't look at you, I can't think about you, I can't talk to you, I can't hope for you . . .

EVELYN: Can you love me?

JO: It's not a matter of love!!

EVELYN: Can you?

JO: Kess!

EVELYN: What do you think families are for? Do you think parents die when you turn twenty-one? I might as well have, if all you're leaving me is the Mental Health Institute and a townful of people saying, "Poor Evelyn Briggs. First her husband walks off, then every one of her daughters abandons her."

angry

careless

KESS: We're not abandoning you. We'll be back. We'll visit.

EVELYN: When? How often?

KESS: Once a month.

EVELYN: Once a month?

KESS: Twice, then. Twice a month.

JO: No . . . !

KESS: Jo! Mom? What do you say?

EVELYN: I have wasted my life raising three animals!!

Furious

JO: (To KESS.) I won't come down!

EVELYN: I lived my life for you! My mother lived her life for me. That's what family means—each generation destroying itself willingly, for what comes after. Even if it's you! (A silence. KESS slowly unpins the cameo from her dress.)

KESS: (Quietly.) Jo and I are going to go upstairs and pack. We'll talk about visits later. (Placing the cameo on a table next to EVELYN.) I think you should keep this for awhile. (A beat. KESS starts for the stairs.) Come on, Jo. (As JO starts after her, EVELYN reaches into the grocery bag and pulls out a can. She raises it high in the air.)

SHERRY: Mom! (EVELYN smashes the can down on the cameo.)

JO: NO!

KESS: Mom!

SHERRY: Jesus! (*A beat. The heirloom is in pieces.*)

JO: How could you do that? How could you do that?!

EVERLYN: **Because it was mine.** (*Lights fade to black.*)

ICEY

Scene Five

Morning, the next day. Before lights rise we hear SHERRY's voice in the darkness. Lights slowly fade up midway through her song to reveal her sitting with KESS's ballad book open in her lap.

SHERRY: "Tis down in yonder garden green,
Love where we used to walk,
The finest flower that e'er was seen
Is withered to a stalk.

(She shifts from the traditional tune to a punk version.)

The stalk is withered dry, my love
So will our hearts decay . . ."

(KESS enters through the porch, and SHERRY immediately snaps the book shut.)

KESS: Is Jo ready? I've got all my stuff in the car.

SHERRY: *(Holding the book up.)* You don't have this.

KESS: *(Taking it.)* Oh—thanks. Jo upstairs?

SHERRY: Guess so.

KESS: What'll you do? When we're gone?

SHERRY: Graduate. Move out.

KESS: *(A beat.)* You're welcome to come and see us, if you ever . . .

SHERRY: (*Suddenly rising.*) Look, I'm going to go over to Ed Randall's for awhile. If Mom asks, tell her I'm there, OK?

KESS: Sure . . . Don't you want to say goodbye to Jo?

SHERRY: No, that's OK.

KESS: Sherry?

SHERRY: What?

KESS: Glad I got to know you again.

SHERRY: Yeah, well . . . see you in four years. (*SHERRY exits out the front. KESS looks around the room a little nervously, then calls.*)

KESS: Jo-o! I'm all set! (*JO enters from upstairs with a pair of bags.*)

JO: Here I am.

KESS: Is that all your stuff?

JO: The rest is in the car.

KESS: Well . . . then, um . . . let's go, I guess.

JO: Could you take these out? I'd like to say goodbye to Mom.

KESS: I already tried. It's not much use.

JO: Could you anyway? (*KESS shrugs, takes the bags.*)

KESS: I'll be in the car. (*KESS exits out the front.*)

JO: (*Calling upstairs.*) Mom?! I'm leaving! Mom? Could you come down? (*JO waits uncomfortably for a moment.*) Mom?! (*She waits again. Finally she shakes her head and starts for the front door. EVELYN appears from upstairs.*) Oh—um, we're leaving now.

EVELYN: I know.

resigned detached

JO: I'm sorry I took so long to pack. (*A beat.*) I'm going to write, you know. Whether or not you write back. (*A beat.*) And . . . I will visit, after awhile. If you'd like me to. (*A*

beat.) I talked to Mrs. Anderberg. She said she'll be glad to come over, as much as you need.

EVELYN: That's nice. She wasn't really born here, you know. She's from Michigan.

JO: I called Dr. Hanson. He'd like to talk with you sometime. Just talk. Whenever you'd like to.

EVELYN: *(A beat.)* Is there anything else?

JO: I want to hug you.

EVELYN: *(A beat.)* Go ahead. Hug me. *(JO hesitates, then does so. EVELYN doesn't resist, but neither does she raise her arms to hug back. JO steps back and stares at her.)*

JO: I could call when we get up there. This afternoon, I mean. *(A beat.)* I think I will. *(A beat. JO starts to leave, stops.)* Should I? *(A beat. JO leaves. Lights slowly fade to black as EVELYN remains still.)*

THE END