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Dramatic Publishing



Beloved Friend

A Full-Length Play

by

NANCY PAHL GILSENAN



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY

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(BELOVED FRIEND)

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BELOVED FRIEND

A Full-Length Play
For Four Women, Two Men, and Extras*

CHARACTERS

KRISTIN HALVORSON a white woman
RACHEL KATIVHU a black woman
MRS. HALVORSON Kristin's mother
GARY DAVIS Kristin's boyfriend and husband
BETTY KATIVHU Rachel's younger sister
PAVU MLAMBO Rachel's boyfriend

*All other characters in the play appear only
once for short periods and may be played by an
ensemble of actors:

SHOPKEEPER a white man
MRS. MITCHELL a white woman
PASS OFFICER a white man
MRS. CAMPBELL a white woman
BUS POLICEMAN a white man
WOMAN a black woman
KENNETH a black man
BRITISH BOBBY a white man
POLICEMAN a white man
SOLDIER ONE a white man
SOLDIER TWO a white man
ANNA a black woman
ESTHER a black woman
DR. MILLS a white man
LEADER a white man or woman
GUARD a white man

TIME: 1966 to 1982

PLACE: The Play Alternates Between Locations in the
United States (Minnesota and California)
and Africa (Rhodesia/Zimbabwe).

CHARACTER NOTES

KRISTIN HALVORSON: a white woman who matures from 16 to 32.

RACHEL KATIVHU: a black woman who matures from 16 to 32.

ACT ONE

SCENE: *The stage is dark. Piano music from Mozart's Variations on "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" rises. Cool, white light rises stage right where KRISTIN, 16, sits playing an elegant piano. She finishes a difficult, lively variation, sits thinking for a moment, and then jumps up excitedly. She faces the audience.*

KRISTIN. Rachel! What about music? It's one of my favorite things in the world. *(Moving downstage, toward the center, sitting down on a step as the light fades on the piano and closes in on KRISTIN.)* Why does it take you forever to write me?

(Warm, yellow light rises on RACHEL, 16, stage left, near the center. She wears a simple dress and is barefooted. She kneels, grinding corn into meal in a bowl. Neither girl looks at the other.)

RACHEL *(without looking up from her work)*. I have been saving all month long, Kristin. When I have enough I take my money to the store for postage.

KRISTIN. But it takes weeks sometimes, and I have so many things to tell you; and even more I want to ask. It's hard to wait.

RACHEL *(laughing as she works)*. That is always the way when things are new, I think, and we are eager to know more. *(A long beat as KRISTIN thinks and RACHEL works.)*

KRISTIN *(turning for the first time to look directly at RACHEL)*. Rachel, have you ever had a white friend?

RACHEL *(turning to look at KRISTIN)*. You are the first. *(A beat as they study one another.)*

KRISTIN. Someday I would like to see your face.

RACHEL. And someday I would like to see you smile.

(They continue to hold each other's gaze for a moment)

as the light on KRISTIN dims slightly and the light on RACHEL expands to reveal upstage left a shopkeeper at a counter and BETTY standing off to one side.)

BETTY (*calling to RACHEL, in a whisper*). Rachel!

(*RACHEL rises and steps back into the scene. KRISTIN draws an air letter from her pocket, and then continues to watch the scene.*)

BETTY (*still whispering, fearful*). I told you he would not stock them on our side of the store.

RACHEL. Then I'll have to ask him to get me one from the white side of the store.

BETTY. You'll make him angry, Rachel. (*As RACHEL walks toward the counter.*) Speak English! He won't listen to Shona.

RACHEL (*to the SHOPKEEPER*). I would like an air letter, please.

SHOPKEEPER. You're the girl from the mission school, aren't you? You asked for one last month. (*Busying himself with a calculation.*) Who are you writing?

RACHEL. A friend.

SHOPKEEPER (*matter of factly, not unkind*). Then buy the plain paper on the African side.

RACHEL. I send my letter to the United States.

SHOPKEEPER (*surprised, skeptical*). You have a friend in America?

RACHEL. In a place called Minneapolis.

SHOPKEEPER. Oh? Who would be your friend there?

RACHEL. Kristin Halvorson. The Lutheran missionaries have brought us together.

SHOPKEEPER. A white girl?

RACHEL. Yes.

SHOPKEEPER (*evenly, not mean*). Aren't you the lucky one?

RACHEL. May I have my air letter, please?

SHOPKEEPER. I don't have any.

RACHEL. I can see them on the other side, on the white side over there.

SHOPKEEPER. No, you're wrong. There are no letters here for white girls in America.

RACHEL (*angry, needing a moment, then defiant*). I will walk to Mtshaberi then!

SHOPKEEPER (*amused*). Five miles? To buy a letter?

RACHEL. I know how to walk. (*RACHEL and BETTY move downstage out of the store as the light fades on the SHOPKEEPER. BETTY catches RACHEL's arm.*)

BETTY. Rachel. Rachel. Five miles is a long way. You can't go that far. (*But RACHEL continues, exiting, and BETTY follows as the lights on the African side go to black.*)

(*MRS. HALVORSON's voice is heard on the American side, as the light there brightens again and expands to include the piano.*)

MRS. HALVORSON'S VOICE. Kristin?

(*MRS. HALVORSON enters upstage.*)

MRS. HALVORSON (*entering*). Kristin? I thought you were practicing.

KRISTIN (*absorbed in the letter*). I am.

MRS. HALVORSON. You're daydreaming. (*She walks over to the piano.*)

KRISTIN. No, I'm not. I'm thinking.

MRS. HALVORSON. Um hum. (*Noticing the music on the piano.*) Are these the Mozart variations?

KRISTIN. Listen to this: they have three huts.

MRS. HALVORSON (*looking over at KRISTIN, under-standing*). Ah, another letter from Rachel.

KRISTIN. "It gives me great pleasure to tell you we are a family of three huts and a bicycle."

MRS. HALVORSON (*moving over to sit down beside KRISTIN, showing some interest in the letter*). You're supposed to be practicing.

KRISTIN. Wait until I tell her we're a family of three bathrooms and a snowmobile. (*KRISTIN hands her mother the letter, and MRS. HALVORSON begins to*

read through it:) Last month I sent her a postcard with the skyline of Minneapolis. Do you know what she said? She's never been to a city. None of the girls on her reserve has.

MRS. HALVORSON (*reading from the letter*). "Beloved Sissy." Why does she call you that?

KRISTIN. It's her translation from the Shona. She means "dear sister." (*Beat.*) She wants a picture. Except for the Lutheran missionaries, and the man who runs the general store, she's never seen any white people. I'm the only white girl she knows.

MRS. HALVORSON (*looking at the letter*). What's sadza?

KRISTIN. Corn meal. It's a kind of porridge. They eat it with grasshoppers. (*KRISTIN smiles, delighted.*)

MRS. HALVORSON (*not really wanting to hear any more*). Oh.

KRISTIN. And white ants. (*Enjoying the effect.*)

MRS. HALVORSON. I see. (*Turning her attention back to the letter.*) How do you heat a hut?

KRISTIN. You don't. You sit around the fire.

MRS. HALVORSON. What about lights? (*KRISTIN smiles and shakes her head no.*) Running water? (*KRISTIN shakes her head no.*) Just the three huts and the bicycle? (*KRISTIN shakes her head yes. Looking at KRISTIN seriously.*) Rhodesia is a long way from Minnesota, Kristin.

KRISTIN (*holding her mother's gaze, confidently*). I know.

MRS. HALVORSON (*rising*). Well, that's a very sweet letter. But you're still not practicing, are you? (*KRISTIN takes the letter from her mother, folds it carefully, then walks to the piano as her mother watches. She sits down and begins to play a variation as MRS. HALVORSON studies her thoughtfully. When the variation is finished, KRISTIN looks up at her mother.*) I think you should be careful, Kristin.

KRISTIN. About what?

MRS. HALVORSON. About telling Rachel you're coming to Africa.

KRISTIN. But I am. I'm going to teach there.

MRS. HALVORSON. Is that what Rachel wants?

KRISTIN. That's what *I* want. I'm going to go as soon as I finish college.

MRS. HALVORSON. You haven't even finished high school yet, Kristin. You could change your mind.

KRISTIN. I won't.

MRS. HALVORSON. What about Gary?

KRISTIN (*picking up her music*). What about Gary?

MRS. HALVORSON. You might want to get married someday. Most people do.

KRISTIN. I'm not most people, Mom.

MRS. HALVORSON (*nicely, but making her point*). But you could change your mind.

KRISTIN. But I won't! I made a promise, Mom. So I won't change my mind. Didn't you ever want to go someplace and do something - something most people won't do? Something you thought was important.

MRS. HALVORSON. But you're sixteen years old, Kristin. You don't know what's important.

KRISTIN. Yes, I do!

MRS. HALVORSON (*showing an edge of anger for the first time*). No, Kristin, you don't. (*Trying not to sound angry.*) I want you to listen to me, please. I know this story, Kristin. There are people who spend a lifetime making bad promises, saying one thing and then doing another. You hurt people that way. You make them trust you, and then you get up and walk away.

KRISTIN (*realizing why her mother's so upset*). Dad didn't mean to hurt us, Mom. That's not why he left.

MRS. HALVORSON. Your father left because he was unfaithful, because he couldn't keep his word. He lied, Kristin.

KRISTIN. I'm not lying to Rachel.

MRS. HALVORSON. We're talking about somebody you hardly know.

KRISTIN. That's not true. She's my friend.

MRS. HALVORSON. How can you say that, honey? You've only been writing for a few months. This is a

girl you've never met. She lives halfway around the world.

KRISTIN (*long beat, looking for a way to prove her friendship*). Rachel walked five miles to buy this letter, and if I had to, I would do that, too.

(The lights fade to black on the American side and come up on the African side. RACHEL enters, carrying a basket of clothes to fold. She is dressed in a domestic servant's uniform. She moves downstage left.)

RACHEL. February, 1967, Beloved Sissy, You must see my address is new. I am gone from the reserve now for the first time. The fees at school are too high, so I must work for a time to earn money. (*Excited.*) I am on a farm, Kristin. They grow tobacco. They call me the nanny. I am told to speak English all the time here. Do my words sound better?

(MRS. MITCHELL enters.)

MRS. MITCHELL. Are the children sleeping, Rachel?

RACHEL. Yes, Mrs. I put them to bed after lunch.

MRS. MITCHELL. I want you to help the kitchen boy with the vegetables for dinner now.

RACHEL. Yes, Mrs. (*Mustering her courage.*) Mrs. Mitchell, do you have a camera?

MRS. MITCHELL. Oh, yes. We take lots of pictures of the children.

RACHEL (*as she pulls out a photo from her apron pocket*). I have a friend, an American girl. She sends me pictures over the last year. And now she asks to see me. (*RACHEL shows MRS. MITCHELL the photo.*)

MRS. MITCHELL (*admiring the photo*). Isn't she lovely? And I suppose you would like me to take a picture of you.

RACHEL. Yes, Mrs. I have never had one.

MRS. MITCHELL. Be a good girl and we'll see. Now finish folding the clothes so you can help the kitchen

boy. (*MRS. MITCHELL exits. RACHEL folds clothes in the basket.*)

RACHEL. You must be very proud to finish your high school this year. I clap my hands with joy for you, and to know you will go to college to become a teacher. I think it is good you desire to join me someday, Kristin. I know God must be with you. (*Beat.*) I do not see my father now for six months. His letters are very angry, I think. Our fathers work hard in the cities, but they do not get paid like the white man. And they cannot come home at night, but must sleep at the factory in dormitories. (*RACHEL finishes folding the clothes. The light on her now expands to reveal the remainder of the kitchen where PAVU stands at a table chopping vegetables. He does not look at her. RACHEL momentarily turns to look at him, then completes narrating her letter.*) I am allowed at times to work with the kitchen boy, Pavu. Pavu knows English. And he reads very well. I think he will go to the university someday. (*RACHEL now walks over to the table where PAVU works. She notices a tin whistle on the table and picks it up.*) What's this? Do you know?

PAVU. A penny whistle.

RACHEL. One of the children left it here.

PAVU. No. It belongs to me.

RACHEL. To you?

PAVU. I bought it. I bought it with my first wages six months ago.

RACHEL. And you can play?

PAVU. I taught myself.

RACHEL. Do you read music?

PAVU. I learned at the mission school. But no one writes music for a penny whistle. I make my own. You know the songs we sing at night by the fire? Those are the best. I play them for my father sometimes when I go home.

RACHEL. I heard the field hands yesterday. They said your father is a chief.

PAVU. He is a chief. (*Sad, a little embarrassed.*)

Without a tribe. (*Whispering, proud.*) Did they tell you this was our land? The whole plantation here, and more, was our land. (*Beat.*) Now my father sits and will not speak to anyone. So I play my music for him. What else is there to do?

RACHEL. Will you be a chief then?

PAVU. Will I? What does it matter now, I wonder. No. I will do something else.

RACHEL. You should go to school again.

PAVU. I can't afford the fees.

RACHEL. You must save your money, Pavu. That's my plan. I'll work now, and then go to secondary school as soon as I have enough for the fees.

PAVU. Most girls don't bother. Look how far behind the white girls you are already.

RACHEL. Only two years. And when I'm finished with secondary school, I will go to college. Maybe I will go to the university.

PAVU (*teasing*). You will be an old woman by the time you are able to afford the university.

RACHEL. I will not! And if I am, I will at least be a very smart old woman. (*THEY laugh.*)

PAVU (*flirting*). I think I like you now, when you are a very pretty young woman.

RACHEL. And what about my ignorance? Do you like that now?

PAVU. Hmm. I have not thought about that. (*Taking her in his arms.*) I'm too busy thinking about your eyes. (*They kiss, then return to working on the vegetables.*)

RACHEL. You could go to the university, too, Pavu. You're very bright. Mrs. Mitchell says you were the brightest boy at the mission school.

PAVU (*angry*). Mrs. Mitchell is an old pig! She knows nothing about me. (*Smiling, teasing.*) Maybe I will chop vegetables all my life. (*Thoughtful, with an edge of bitterness.*) A servant is always safe.

RACHEL. Safe from what?

PAVU. From whatever keeps him in his place, from the power which makes him hide.

RACHEL (*encouraging him*). I think someday you will go to school, Pavu.

PAVU. Do you? I think someday I will stop hiding. (*Beat, referring to the whistle.*) I could play for you. (*Shying.*) Sometime, if you like.

(The lights on the African scene dim slightly and lights rise on the American side as KRISTIN enters. She is dressed in a letter jacket and boots. She is reading a letter from RACHEL.)

KRISTIN. These are good things you write me from your city Minneapolis, Sissy, about your school and your piano and your flying down the hills of ice on wooden sticks, this thing you call skiing.

(GARY enters with a gym bag, hockey skates around his neck, and a hockey stick. He shoots toward KRISTIN with his hockey stick.)

GARY (*yelling*). Goal!

KRISTIN. Nice shot! Is that the same one you used on Willy Martindale?

GARY. Hey, he tripped me, Kris.

KRISTIN (*shaking her head*). That's great, Gary. Is he hurt?

GARY. The puck caught him on the bridge of his nose.

KRISTIN. Did you break it?

GARY. Can't tell yet, but they wrapped him up in a bandage as big as a pineapple.

KRISTIN. Patti told me they were going to spend the weekend necking in her father's ice house.

GARY. No chance of that. Willy's mouth can't do anything but breathe for the next two months. (*Beat.*) Maybe we could borrow the ice house. (*He kisses her.*)

KRISTIN (*pulling back, but liking the kiss*). No thanks. My mother's told me all about the dangers of ice houses.

GARY. Last chance before we go East to school.

KRISTIN. Before you go East to school.

GARY. Come on, Kris. You got into five of the seven sisters. (*Easy, approaching a sore subject.*) You really want to stay here and go to St. Olaf?

KRISTIN. What's wrong with St. Olaf?

GARY. Nothing. Except that I'm going to Dartmouth.

(*Beat.*) I thought you liked me, Kris.

KRISTIN. I do.

GARY (*smiling*). I mean *really* liked me.

KRISTIN. I do.

GARY. You told Patti I was irresistible.

KRISTIN. I did not!

GARY. It's okay, Kris. The word is out: Patti told Willy. Willy told me. (*Beat.*) Why won't you come East to school with me?

KRISTIN. Because I like the theology program at St. Olaf.

GARY. Because you want to go to Africa?

KRISTIN. Um hum.

GARY (*thinking, fiddling with hockey stick*). I've, ah, been thinking about the girls at Dartmouth.

KRISTIN. Oh? I didn't know there were any girls at Dartmouth.

GARY. Hey, I hear the place is crawling with 'em on weekends. They come from all over New England, just to see the freshman guys.

KRISTIN (*with slightly noticeable regret*). I guess you'll have a great time there.

GARY. You bet. No blonde, blue-eyed Swedes with minds of their own to put up with there.

KRISTIN. No. You'd have to come to St. Olaf to find one of those.

GARY (*looking at her, serious*). So why don't you ask me?

KRISTIN (*surprised, confused*). Ask you what?

GARY. If I'll come to St. Olaf with you.

KRISTIN. And give up the chance to go to Dartmouth? Are you crazy?

GARY. Some people think so. Why don't you ask me, Kris? (*He takes her hands in his. Lights fade slowly on*