

FAMILY SECRETS

TEN MINUTE PLAY

By Philip Vassallo

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SYNOPSIS: A hospital patient, Carol, 43, refuses to sign a do-not-resuscitate order on her life before the audience, which represents her attending physician; a convict to be executed, Richard, 21, refuses to confess his sins to the audience, which represents a prison chaplain; and Becky, 19, refuses to videotape a speech denouncing America before the audience, which represents her Iraqi captors. Each speaks to the audience, unaware of the others' presence and of their blood relationship to each other. Through their monologues, we see the limitations of language, the richness of emotional energy in the face of death, and the nature of blood relationships.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(1 MAN, 2 WOMEN)

CAROL (F)A patient in a hospital, 43 years old.

RICHARD (M)A prisoner in a state correctional facility, 21 years old.

BECKY (F)A prisoner of war in an Iraqi bunker, 19 years old.

SET

An ICU room in a hospital, an execution room in a prison, and a bunker in Iraq. The play is ideally produced on a black box stage with a sparsely designed representational set suggesting an ICU room in a hospital, an execution chamber in a prison, and a bunker in Iraq. At left is a gurney with straps raised in a vertical position and an intravenous stand to represent the execution chamber. (A solid wooden chair with electrical apparatus to represent an electric chair may substitute.) At center is an intravenous stand to represent a hospital room. At right is a bare space to represent the Iraqi bunker.

TIME: Sometime in 2006.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Critical to the dramatic movement of *Family Secrets* is the timing. Since the three characters are mostly immobile because of the circumstances in which they find themselves, their drama occurs not through their motions but their voices. The lines spoken in unison should create a unifying connection among them—a family trait, so to speak. While they do not know each other and have their own personalities, their unison lines should resemble each other in cadence and inflection. In the rehearsal process, the director should advise the actors of this duality: for CAROL, the audience is her doctor, for RICHARD, the audience is his chaplain, and for BECKY, the audience is her Iraqi captors—each of whom the characters are defying. While they speak to the audience, they do not realize that they are speaking to themselves as well.

COSTUMES:

For CAROL: Hospital gown and slippers.

For RICHARD: Prison jumpsuit.

For BECKY: U. S. Army combat uniform, thermal underwear, blindfold.

PROPS:

For execution chamber: Gurney with straps
Intravenous stand with tubes

For hospital room: Intravenous stand with tubes
Oxygen mask

For Iraqi bunker: Blindfold
Rope

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Family Secrets premiered on February 23, 2005 in the Short Cuts Tour production of the Miami-based City Theatre.

Carol Jacqueline Laggy
Richard..... Todd Allen Durkin
BeckyLauren Feldman
Producing Artistic Director..... Stephanie Norman
Director Kim St. Leon

To my sister, Elizabeth Vassallo Hitz

SETTING:

An ICU room in a hospital at CENTER, an execution room at LEFT, and a bunker at RIGHT.

AT RISE:

CAROL, wearing a hospital gown, enters the hospital room and sits on the bed. She solemnly places an oxygen mask over her face and connects herself to intravenous fluids and monitoring devices. She sits on her bed under bed sheets and speaks to the audience, her physician. Her breathing is labored. Simultaneously, RICHARD, wearing a prison uniform, enters, straps himself to a gurney and connects himself to intravenous fluids. He speaks to the audience, his chaplain. His trembling voice belies his tough words. Simultaneously, BECKY, wearing a U.S. Army combat uniform, enters the bunker, strips down to bloodied and dirty thermal long underwear, binds her feet, blindfolds herself, and binds her hands. She speaks to the audience, her captors. She often cowers. None of the characters are aware of the others' presence. After each character is in place, the monologues begin.

CAROL: I'm telling you, Doctor, I'm in my right mind, and I refuse to sign a do-not-resuscitate order. As long as my heart beats, I'm alive.

RICHARD: Father, I ain't got nothing to confess. And even if I did, why would I confess to you? There ain't no one standing between me and my Lord. Especially—with all due respect—not a stranger showing up a few minutes before my final breath. What do you wanna hear? That I'm truly sorry for doing what I had to do?

BECKY: I told you everything I know. I swear. The Army don't tell the privates nothing important. I'm Becky Habib, Private First Class, Five-Oh-Seven Maintenance Ordnance Company, U. S. Army. I'm not trying to be a hero or nothing. I think my arm is broken.

CAROL: I reject what you call life because your godlessness sickens my heart more than any sickness my body feels. Your science saddens me to the core of my soul. Get down from that arrogant

posture you're assuming in my presence, Doctor. Whatever you know more than me isn't doing me one lick of good, so don't you come in here telling me about how I feel, how I'm gonna feel, and what I've gotta do about it.

CAROL, RICHARD, AND BECKY: (*CAROL speaks brashly, RICHARD sarcastically, and BECKY fearfully. In unison.*) You haven't even asked me how I feel.

RICHARD: I feel fine.

CAROL: I feel ill.

BECKY: I feel like I'm about to die.

RICHARD: But not like I'm about to die.

CAROL: But not like I'm about to die.

RICHARD: Even though the clock is ticking awfully fast.

CAROL: Even though the clock is ticking awfully slow.

BECKY: And I don't even know the time of day. I'm very thirsty. May I have my canteen? . . . No, sir. We were told that the water here might be polluted . . . Please don't drink it. It's all I have. (*Sobs.*)

RICHARD AND CAROL: Life is precious. Better than all the suffering I've known.

RICHARD: But if you're going to take my life from me . . .

CAROL: But you ain't going to take my life from me.

BECKY: Dear Lord, please. I don't wanna die.

CAROL AND RICHARD: Amen to that.

BECKY: I am sorry for what is happening to your people. I really am. I don't wanna see anybody die.

RICHARD: I know what you're thinking: "They're all innocent." But I got news for you, if you can get it through them robes of yours, which is something the judge couldn't do. We all say we're innocent, because we are.

CAROL: Next of kin? Not a soul. I am the master of my own soul.

BECKY: Yes. Habib is my real name. I know it's Arabic, sir. I was adopted at birth.

RICHARD: Like I told you before, I got no family. When I lived with them nuns, they said right after I was born my mother put me and a harmonica in a shopping bag and threw us in a dumpster.

BECKY: My parents? They're Coptic Christians from Egypt, sir. I apologize for that.

CAROL: I had two babies. A long time ago. But the first—looked just like his father—he died right after he came into the world.

RICHARD: It's like I died right after I came into the world.

CAROL: He never had a chance.

BECKY: Sir, all I know is that my birth mother gave me up for adoption. I never met her.

RICHARD: I ain't squawking or nothing, Father. I took my chances. That's just the way it is.

CAROL: That's just the way it is. But he never had a chance. My second-born, she was beautiful like the sky. My, could that girl cry a river and kick up an entire desert. But I couldn't care for her. Not without no daddy to help out. I asked the Lord to help me, and He told me to put her up for adoption. So I did.

RICHARD: Hey, talking about that feels good. Like a burden off my shoulder.

CAROL: Hey, talking about that took a little of my pain away. Dear Lord.

BECKY: Dear Lord, I can't take this pain.

RICHARD: (*Laughs.*) Dear Lord, never before did I tell anyone about that family secret, if that's what you wanna call it. If I knew it would make me feel like this, I would've shouted it from the rooftop at rush hour.

CAROL: Maybe it's good that you walked in here after all. Share a little family secret with you. Give me a reason to remember when I wasn't suffering like this at all.

BECKY: I've got no secrets. I wanna go home.

RICHARD: Now, don't you take that as some kind of contrition.

CAROL: Now, don't you go figuring out a way of charging me for that bit of counseling.

BECKY: Please don't ask me to do that. If I go on camera saying those things, I could never face my family and friends.

RICHARD: If you wanna say a prayer of forgiveness, you're barking up the wrong tree. Do what the cops couldn't do. Find that lady who bore me and forgive *her* sins.

CAROL: But I'm at peace now, Doctor. You come into this world alone and you die alone.

BECKY: Yes sir, my family and friends matter that much to me. I come from a community where people care about each other. Some of my friends just died out there, and I honor them.

RICHARD: That's something you can't do in the privacy of your confession box. You gotta find her so that she really knows she's forgiven. And while you're at it, give her back the harmonica. That is, if the police don't need it no more.

BECKY: And my parents . . . just before I joined the Army, I wanted to meet my birth mother. But the agency said that she didn't wanna see me. Didn't wanna see her own *blood*. She left me with nothing. I hope that woman finds some peace, and I thank God they saved me from that. *(Pause.)*

CAROL AND BECKY: This pain is killing me. *(A beat.)* Dear Lord, make me a child again. *(Pause.)*

RICHARD: Yep. The same one she left me with. A Hohner Marine Band in B-flat. One of the sisters gave it to me when I was like six years old. I could play a mean blues on it. Sonny Boy Williamson. Little Walter. You name it. I could make that baby wail like a cat in heat or a woman moaning for her lover to bring it all home.

BECKY: Can't I just say that I'm sorry for the suffering of your people? Ain't that enough?

CAROL: That boy's father was another story. The stuff that man got me into. I was innocent when I met him. A girl. He seduced me with that harmonica of his and moved in with me that winter. But when I got pregnant, he just disappeared and left me with his baby and that harmonica. Anyway, the baby didn't make it.

BECKY: Can I say something? Please?

RICHARD: How could they call my baby the murder weapon? I made that baby cut into the soul of a chick or two. Killing with love? Maybe that.

BECKY: *(Removes blindfold. Boldly.)* I did not come to your country by choice. What else can you do to me? You've killed everyone in my patrol. You've raped me. You even made me renounce my

God. And you're starving me to death. From here on in, dying is easier than talking.

CAROL: My girl's father? The kind of living I ended up doing, don't know who that might be. And if I did, none of your business. So I've got no kin whatsoever. From here on out, dying is easier than living.

RICHARD: Yep. I beat his brains in with it till his heart stopped beating. No doubting that.

CAROL: *(Removes oxygen mask.)* I don't care what you call brain-dead. What's the brain compared to the heart?

BECKY: You can take my body but not my heart. From where you've got me right now . . .

RICHARD: From what I can see here . . .

CAROL: From this position you've got me in . . .

CAROL, RICHARD, AND BECKY: *(Boldly, in unison.)* I can see the future.

RICHARD: I'm gonna make it to the other side. You call that murder? After what he was doing to his stepdaughter? For God knows how long? She was nine, for God's sake. If he had a problem with me and her mom, he shoulda took it up with me. Killing a fly is more murder than what I did.

CAROL: I expect to live no matter what your expensive contraptions and evil education say.

CAROL, RICHARD, AND BECKY: *(In unison.)* No matter what I do . . .

BECKY: I expect to die here in this bunker, sir.

RICHARD: Regret it? The only thing I regret is that I busted one of the harmonica reeds on his foolish head. And that the cops took it from me and I couldn't play no more.

CAROL: You don't understand life any better than a fetus. I pray you seek God's forgiveness for the devil's work you do.

BECKY: And I pray for your soul.

RICHARD: So get this show on the road. I'm ready.

CAROL: So get off your high horse. I ain't ready. Afraid of dying? What a foolish thought. It's *life* that scares us. And I'm gonna spend the rest of my God-given days shaking off that fear like dust on my shoulder.

RICHARD: I fear nothing. Sorry if that's not what you wanna hear, Father.

BECKY: I got nothing to fear. Sorry if that's not what you want to hear, sir.

CAROL: Sorry if that's not what you wanna hear, Doctor. I got my fear.

RICHARD: Nothing at all.

CAROL: But I'm fighting it like Michael fought Satan in heaven's war.

RICHARD: Just find that lady.

BECKY: I came in this world alone and I'm ready to die alone.

CAROL, RICHARD, AND BECKY: (*CAROL speaks resignedly, RICHARD fearfully, BECKY bravely. In unison.*) And let whatever's gonna happen happen.

CAROL: I'll soon see my children.

They shut their eyes as lights fade.

RICHARD: Let it be on me.

BECKY: Let it be on me.

CAROL: Let it be on me.

CAROL, RICHARD, AND BECKY: Let it be on me.

BLACKOUT.

THE END