

# ***THE BIRDS THAT STAY***

*By L. Don Swartz*

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## **DEDICATION**

*With love to KELLY ANN SWARTZ, my sister and best friend. Growing up with you has been my greatest adventure yet.*

## **STORY OF THE PLAY**

It is the summer of 1969. A time for growing up. The Vietnam war is raging; Dorothy Gale of Kansas dies of a drug overdose; three men walk across the face of the moon; Charles Manson goes on a "Helter Skelter" killing spree, and the hippies dance naked at Woodstock. While all this was shaking the nation, behind the Chestnut Hollow Cemetery in upstate New York, five young friends embark on the backyard adventure of a lifetime.

In a world seemingly out of control, the five youngsters struggle desperately with personal demons that will not let them enjoy a typical summer vacation. Kyle tries reluctantly to keep a dead man's promise; Chance is being driven closer and closer to a deadly encounter with the evil Otis Pratt; Kelly fights valiantly to hold together her disintegrating family; Angie tries frantically to escape from her world of silence; and cousin Dylan is being terrorized by his dead grandmother.

Feeling utterly lost and hopeless, the children turn to a mysterious gravedigger named Arlo Grubb who teaches them how to live. "It all comes down to flight or fight. If you think you're fast enough, fly. If not, get ready to make a stand."

*"One of the strongest and most ambitious original theater pieces produced by a community (or professional) troupe in many years. It is characterized by clever and witty dialogue, good pacing, and characters rich enough to leave a lasting impression upon the heart and mind." The Niagara Gazette*

## **ORIGINAL PRODUCTION**

THE BIRDS THAT STAY was originally produced by the Ghostlight Theatre Company at the Riviera Theatre in North Tonawanda, New York, on October 15, 1993. It was directed by L. Don Swartz; set and lighting design by Daniel W. Sonnen; costume design by Debby Koszelak Swartz; the stage manager was Bob Tamasini. The original cast included: Tami Doktor, Joelle Karch, Stephen Holesko, Scott Lesinski, L. Don Swartz, Patricia Faulhaber, Gerry Przybylski, Julie Senko, Daniel Barrett, and Debby Koszelak Swartz. Zombies included Andrea Campagna, Jessi Doktor, Katie Dube, Kristy Faulhaber, Brooke Mentkowski, Debbie Rotolo, Tara Rotolo, Bob Tamasini, and Pat White.

## **CAST OF CHARACTERS**

*(5 m, 5 w, extras)*

**ANGIE MAGRADY:** 10, afraid to talk.

**KELLY BARTLETT:** 13, coming of age.

**KYLE BARTLETT:** 14, Kelly's brother.

**CHANCE MAGRADY:** 13, Kyle's best friend.

**ARLO GRUBB:** Cemetery caretaker.

**MRS. BARTLETT:** Kelly and Kyle's mom.

**MRS. PRATT:** Angie and Chance's mom.

**OTIS PRATT:** Angie and Chance's cruel stepfather.

**COUSIN DYLAN:** 12, has suffered trauma.

**THE GRANDMOTHER:** Dylan's worst nightmare.

**THE ZOMBIES:** From the graveyard.

## **SYNOPSIS**

### **ACT I**

Scene 1 - June 22, 1969, late afternoon.

Scene 2 - June 23, 1969, middle of a sunny afternoon.

Scene 3 - June 24, 1969, late afternoon.

Scene 4 - July 14, 1969, midnight.

Scene 5 - July 20, 1969, dusk.

### **ACT II**

Scene 1 - July 24, 1969, past midnight.

Scene 2 - August 15, 1969, night.

Scene 3 - August 23, 1969, rainy afternoon.

Scene 4 - August 24, 1969, late at night.

Scene 5 - August 26, 1969, afternoon.

Scene 6 - September 1, 1969, early morning.

## **SETTING**

Adjoining backyards of the Bartlett and Pratt houses in Chestnut Hollow. The back porches of both houses are visible. There are steps leading up to the Bartlett porch, SL, and a wooden railing surrounding the porch. A portion of the Bartlett house is visible, including a screen door and a first and second story screened window. The house is freshly painted and the yard is neatly kept. SR is the Pratt porch ... a low narrow platform without any steps. There is also a screen door and a first and second story window but the Pratt house is shabbier than the Bartlett house and the lawn is scruffy and wanting care.

A pathway between the two houses leads UPS to a low iron fence that separates the two yards from the Chestnut Hollow cemetery, which is situated on a gently sloping hillside. A gate in the fence allows passage between the cemetery and the two yards. Inside the cemetery, at the bottom of the hill, is a small concrete block mausoleum with a large wooden door and barred windows. Carved deep in the stone above the mausoleum door are the words, "Your Name Here."

There are a variety of tombstones and monuments visible, as well as some trees and bushes. DSL in the Bartlett yard is a low brick fire pit. DSR in the Pratt yard is a gray, weather-worn picnic table with separate benches.

There is a trapdoor for the Grandmother to disappear into located in either the Bartlett porch or the fire pit.

*See additional notes at the end of the playbook.*

**ACT I**  
**Scene 1**

*(AT RISE: June 22, 1969. Late afternoon. We hear Gounod's "Funeral March of the Marionettes." In the yard between the two houses sits a large cardboard box tilted at an odd angle with the DS side propped up with a broken tree branch. ANGIE MAGRADY quietly sneaks out of the Pratt house and approaches the box. She carefully walks around it, examining it from every angle. She crouches in the grass and gently touches the tree branch, which begins to move. Startled, she moves away from the box. Just as she is about to approach the box again, she hears a door slam in the Bartlett house. Angie darts into her house, letting the screen door slam behind her. KELLY BARTLETT, age 13, kicks open the screen door and steps out onto the porch. She slams the screen door three times.)*

KELLY: Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! *(Whirling around SHE kicks the porch rail with all her might. She grabs her injured foot and hops up and down.)* Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! *(KELLY sits on the porch steps and buries her head in her arms. She begins to softly cry. After a few seconds, she brings her head up and wipes the tears from her eyes. ANGIE is watching her from a window in her house.)* What are you lookin' at? *(ANGIE disappears from the window. KELLY shakes her head in disgust. She spies the box in the yard.)* Now what?

*(KELLY crosses to the box and inspects it. Noticing a string tied to the broken tree branch, she follows it to where it disappears behind the Pratt house. Standing on the Pratt porch she peers around the house. Suddenly, she flattens herself against the wall of the house. A sly grin steals across her face. After taking another quick peek around the corner of the house, she tip-toes to the box and carefully wriggles her body under it. A moment later her hand snakes out, searching for the string in the grass. Finding it, she gives a mighty tug. Two boys charge out from behind the house. KYLE and CHANCE, the latter with a grimy plaster cast on his left arm, rush to the box. MUSIC fades out as they speak.)*

CHANCE: *(Jumping up and down.)* We got one! We got one!

*(We hear summer birds, quietly throughout the rest of the scene.)*

KYLE: What do we do now?

CHANCE: We do the Great Hunter Victory Dance! *(CHANCE circles the box doing a wild Indian dance.)* Let's see what kind of bird we caught! *(HE reaches for the box.)*

KYLE: *(Stopping HIM.)* Wait! What if it's not a bird?

CHANCE: What do you mean, if it's not a bird? Kyle, of course it's a bird! What else would go for the bread?

KYLE: *(Ominously.)* Chance, lots of things eat bread. *(There is an eerie howl from within and the box begins to tremble wildly. The two BOYS move away from the box.)*

CHANCE: Holy cow-pie, Batman! That ain't no bird!

KYLE: Get the baseball bat off my porch! Hurry! (*CHANCE races for the bat. The box becomes strangely silent.*) Gimmee. (*CHANCE hands HIM the bat.*)

CHANCE: What do you think it is?

KYLE: I don't know.

CHANCE: Listen. Not a sound.

KYLE: Put your ear close to the box and listen.

CHANCE: (*Begins to, then thinks better of it.*) You.

KYLE: No, you. I got the bat.

CHANCE: Gimmee the bat.

KYLE: And what will you be able to do with the bat?

(*CHANCE looks at the cast on his arm. He bends slowly towards the box, presses his ear against it.*)

CHANCE: I can't hear a thing. I think it's dead. (*The box suddenly comes alive and the trapped mystery creature lets go with an angry roar. CHANCE screams and runs for his back door.*) I'm gettin' old man Pratt's gun and blowin' its head off!!

KYLE: (*Intercepting HIM.*) Chance, get back here! You ain't gonna shoot it, whatever it is!

CHANCE: What are we supposed to do? Let it tear us apart? (*The creature in the box becomes silent.*) There it goes being quiet again. It's spooky. Like it has this intelligence and it's playing with our minds. Like an alien!

KYLE: It ain't an alien! Now, just stop and think a minute. What are the possibilities? It could be a raccoon, or a ground hog, or a fox, or a dog or ...

CHANCE: It might be a mutated sewer rat! Or a wild dingo!

KYLE: Dingos only live in Australia. Get serious, we have a situation here. (*Another roar.*) What does it sound like to you?

CHANCE: The Tasmanian Devil!

KYLE: Knock it off, Chance, will ya? Tasmanian Devil! (*We hear a strange muffled sound from inside the box.*)

CHANCE: Listen to that. What's it doin' now?

KYLE: (*Leaning towards the box.*) It almost sounds like it's laughin' at us.

CHANCE: I knew it! A laughin' hyena!!!

(*Suddenly, KELLY stands up and throws the box off of her. The BOYS fall to the ground as she lets out a ferocious roar.*)

KELLY: Run for your lives! It's the Tasmanian Devil! It's an unidentified wild dingo beast! Rooooooar!!!! (*SHE sits on the ground between THEM and laughs. In her best "Bugs Bunny" she says:*) What a couple of morons!

CHANCE: Really funny, Kelly! You almost got your head shot off, you know!

KYLE: Kelly! What were you doin' in there?

KELLY: Just playin' a joke. A wild dingo!

CHANCE: Coulda been. It was scary not knowin' what we caught.

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KELLY: Wuss!

CHANCE: Wuss yourself!

KYLE: *(Getting up.)* I have to admit, you got us good. Didn't she, Chance?

CHANCE: *(Getting up.)* Yeah. She got us pretty good for a girl. Just you wait, I'll get you back. I'll have my revenge.

KELLY: Watch me tremble!

CHANCE: Yeah, we'll see.

KELLY: *(Crosses to HER porch.)* What are you guys trying to do, anyway?

KYLE: Trying to catch a bird.

KELLY: Why?

CHANCE: Why not?

KELLY: Duh!

KYLE: I don't know. We got bored.

KELLY: Bored? It's only the second week of summer vacation, and the summer is gonna fly right past us. How could you possibly be bored already? *(The BOYS shrug.)* What were you gonna do with it?

CHANCE: Do with what?

KELLY: The bird. If you caught the bird, what would you have done with it?

CHANCE: I don't know.

KYLE: Let it go, I suppose.

CHANCE: Yeah, let it go.

KELLY: What if you hurt it? Did you ever stop and think about that? What if you broke its wing?

CHANCE: Well we didn't, so don't worry about it!

KELLY: You have no right to do that. No right!

KYLE: Kelly, we weren't trying to hurt anything ... just catch a bird, that's all.

KELLY: You can hurt something without meaning to, you know. And thanks a lot for askin' me!

CHANCE: Askin' you what?

KELLY: If I wanted to catch a bird! Thanks a lot! Always nice to be included.

CHANCE: But, you just said ...

KELLY: Just skip it! *(SHE crosses to the picnic table and sits on top of it.)*

KYLE: Kelly, we were looking for you ... we couldn't find you.

CHANCE: Yeah.

KYLE: Where did you go?

KELLY: I went for a walk.

CHANCE: Always nice to be included.

KELLY: Sometimes thinking people like to be alone with their thoughts, Chance Magrady! *(HE responds, as he often does when he finds himself at a loss for words, with a loud and long raspberry.)*

KYLE: Would you like to be alone, now?

KELLY: Yes! *(The BOYS shrug and start to leave.)* No!

KYLE: What do you want to do, then?

KELLY: Nothing.

KYLE: What's the matter?

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