

A New Name ... A New Life (Kim Darby)

SEVENTEEN

by Edwin Miller June, 1969

Kim Darby may well be the most talented actress of her generation. Judge for yourself with "True Grit"

Bundled in a burlap jacket and a faded red skirt, with a navy bowler perched on her head, Kim Darby sits on a rock in Colorado and clutches her knees, watching director Henry Hathaway set up the next scene for True Grit. Adapted from Charles Portis' best-selling novel, the Western tells the adventures of a determined teen-ager who hires a cocky conceited Texas Marshall (John Wayne) and a conceited Texas Ranger (Glen Campbell) to pursue her father's murderer from old Arkansas into wild Indian territory. A street and a square in a faded cow town in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains have been refurbished as one of the locations for the film. The courthouse and the livery stable and the great cottonwood trees provide marvelous atmosphere, the authentic look of American Gothic. Ringed by vast range of mountains on the horizon, Kim seems smaller than she is, her face as pretty and sweet and warm with color as the crisp Macintosh apple. She is nervous this first week of shooting and her hazel eyes are shadowed. "When I work on a role," Kim says in a voice so low you strain to hear, "I read and read the script, soaking up everything about the character until I've absorbed it inside of me, and then I'll read a single page over and over again until I find myself relating some aspect of the character to something in my own life. But once in a while I can go on and do a scene without any preparation at all, and it will come out just right! I like Mattie in True Grit. I think people will like her too. Everyone

keeps talking about how much firmness she has, but I see a lot more in her. She's very deep and has a lot of humor too, and I'm trying to make her real. In the book she's only fourteen, but fortunately, even though I'm twenty-one, I look very young and I'm not worrying about the age. All I'm trying to do is be careful that she doesn't turn out to be cute. It would be awfully easy to make her cute." "I'm terribly nervous today. It's the first time I'm working while Mr. Hal Wallis, the producer of the picture, is watching me. He is very nice. Henry Hathaway, the director, was devastating in the beginning. He told me when I met him that he was rough, but I didn't know what that really meant until I actually started working. He yelled and shouted and it was terrible. I do my best when a director is gentle and I feel he knows me - the way it is with Arthur Penn, who was such a kind person. I worked with him when I did a TV special, *Flesh and Blood*, two years ago. But Mr. Hathaway has quieted down now - the level has evened out and I think things will be all right. I haven't worked with Glen Campbell yet so I really haven't formed any feeling in relation to his character. I just started with John Wayne today. He's nice. He's big and I'm tiny. He stands there, I look up at him, and things happen. Somehow it's the way it should be. I like that, when things develop spontaneously, when you don't plan everything out. When you do things over and over again, sometimes the excitement is lost. I'm developing the character of Mattie too - the scene where the undertaker asks me if I want to kiss my father in the coffin before he nails the lid down. I say no, because if I did, then I would be likely to just cry and go on home and never do anything about my father's killer. I never really get angry or lose my temper. Whenever things get too much for me, I cry. I cry a lot." "In school - I went to Van Nuys junior high school and high school in North Hollywood, where I was born and grew up - I was so shy I didn't talk to anyone. I wanted to talk to the other kids and be popular but I didn't know how, so I thought one way of becoming popular was to act. I tried to get into dramatics at school, but they were very clique-y and I was never accepted. They my grandmother saw a notice in the newspaper about a training group at the Desilu Studio, and I went down to be interviewed. At first I didn't think I would get in. I was thirteen years old and looked nine, but somehow they said all right, they would

accept me, and I began going twice a week for three hours, from eight to eleven at night. It kept me up late but I was always a late person. We did improvisations and scenes and speeches, which I ever did much with; I went for three years until I got tired of it and quit. At sixteen I auditioned for a *Mr. Novak* show. I was trying for the role of a blind girl named Julie and I remember eight men staring at me while I read for the part. One of them cried. It was the last scene, where Mr. Novak explains to her that her love for him is impossible but does it in such a way that she can go on in the future, knowing it's not all over. When that one week of work was done, I went to my room and cried and cried. "That was in 1963, and it was the first time I had ever been part of something that was my own, with people wanting me because I was me and not because of who my parents were or anyone else. After that, I worked regularly on TV and each time I did a show and had to say good-bye to everyone when we were finished, I would cry because it was like leaving my family. But the odd thing was that in school after a while, when people realized I was acting on TV, I just became someone to stare at. When I was sixteen, I dated one boy for about six months. We were never introduced. I saw him sitting on the grass one day and went over and sat down next to him and he asked me if I wanted to eat lunch together. We went out and he got to be the most popular boy in school, but nothing ever changed for me at all!" "Working was always difficult. I made one movie, *Bus Riley's Back in Town*, with Michael Parks and Ann-Margret - that must be about four years ago - but nothing ever happened after that. It's hard when you're underage. You have to have a tutor on the set and you have to have class for three hours a day and it's such a production when they hire you! I still get angry when I think about graduating from high school. I should have walked out. I hated school. I never really learned anything, but I never had the nerve to quite when I wanted to. For years I was so shy I was unable to speak up or say what I thought or felt about anything. It wasn't until I was seventeen or eighteen that I had built up my confidence to the point where I could say what was on my mind. One thing I would never do, though, was sign a contract with anyone. Universal wanted to put me under contract when I made *Bus Riley* but I said no. I've never wanted to tie myself up to anyone."

"My mother was a ballet dancer. My father was a professional dancer too, and they had an act called The Dancing Zerbys. They were divorced when I was two, but they got together again professionally for a while. I remember watching them as a little girl, up in the control booth at some hotel floor show in Las Vegas. My father used to wear tails, and my mother wore a long gown and they'd whirl around, dancing all over the country in supper clubs and floor shows. My father's been married five times; my mother was his third wife. She was a German girl and they married just before the war when she was sixteen. She wanted to take me when they were divorced, but there was arguments and many stories and finally I was awarded to my father. I live with my paternal grandparents, who brought me up. My mother's remarried now to a businessman; they live in Beverly Hills and have a boy and a girl. For a long time, I didn't feel close to her, but now we are and I see her." "My grandfather is eighty-five. My grandmother, who's a very strong woman, used to getting what she wants, is in her eighties too. He was a dentist originally, then he went into carnivals, and after that he went into real estate, which is what he was doing when I lived with them. But in the old days he had traveling carnivals all over the West. He loved parades and circuses and all those things. My father used to dance with the carnivals - that's how he got into show business. Now he teaches exercises at a place for housewives who want to improve themselves - they study anything from dance movement to yoga to flower arrangement and painting." "I didn't have any brothers or sisters, and it's hard being brought up by people so much older than you are. When I was a little girl I used to play by myself and pretend and read a lot. I didn't mind being alone so much then. From the time I was eight years old until I was sixteen, my father, who had a dance studio then, made me take ballet lessons. Oh, how I hated it! He used to shout at me in class all the time, yell at me for not doing things the way he thought I should. I hated that, too. My real name was Deborah, and he used to call me Derby, Derby Zerby all the time, and the girls I used to dance with would hear him calling me that. Every day at Van Nuys when the roll would be taken I would sit there and wait until the end, waiting for Zerby and the laugh that would go with it. When I did that first Mr. Novak, when I was sixteen, I changed my name. I didn't want

to be reminded of my father - I wanted it all on my own. I decided to call myself Kim because of a girl at school, a very pretty girl, one I admired very much; and Darby - well, somehow, I didn't want to get very far from Derby. My father understands now, I think, what he did wrong. He's very proud of me now." "I've played about twenty parts on TV; in shows like *The Eleventh Hour*; *Dr. Kildare*; *Gunsmoke*; *Bonanza*; *The Fugitive*. In almost all I was a very private kind of person, very introverted. There were two times that I played an open kind of girl, in the movie *Bus Riley* and when I was an unwed mother in *Run for Your Life*. Ben Gazzara directed, and he let the camera run even after the scenes were finished until he got me the way he wanted. He's a nice person. That's the show Hal Wallis saw which made him think of me for the role of Mattie. When I was eighteen I went into a play, *The Porcelain Years* by Reginald Rose, which folded in New York. We had eight weeks of work - four of rehearsals, then four on the road - but I didn't enjoy acting on the stage. It wasn't intimate enough. You can't get as close as you can with the camera." "That same year I moved out of my grandparents' home. I must have moved six times in eight months until I found a place I liked and started to furnish an apartment with antiques and things. Then I met Jim - Jim Stacy - about two years ago, when we did a *Gunsmoke* together called 'Vengeance'. I kept going up to the director, a dear man, asking, 'Do you think he notices me? Do you think he likes me?' I must have driven him crazy. Finally, Jim asked me out and we began dating. He went to Europe for a few weeks while he was working on a TV show. I went to see him and when we came back we were married, and he went into a series called *Lancer*." "After we started going out together," she adds, "I began to laugh. I really came alive in a way I had never been before and Jim was responsible. [Kim and Jim Stacy have since separated.] "I was first approached about *True Grit* when I was seven months pregnant and I turned it down. I hadn't worked in a year. But things changed and I said all right, I'd do it. Before I took it, though, I told them I wouldn't do much with horses besides getting on and off, and they said all right. I don't like horses. I'm afraid of them, afraid they'll step on my feet. My father tried to teach me to ride once. He insisted I get on, and the horse ran away

with me. I was terrible frightened. In the picture, another girl wears a latex mask of my face for the long shots when I'm supposed to be riding a horse across a river. To make the mask they put something on my skin and then poured plaster over that and over my eyes. It didn't take long - only ten minutes - but it was frightening to be shut out that way. Grandpa went with me and held my hand while it was going on. Dear Grandpa." "My daughter is eight weeks old and I have her here with someone to take care of her. She's named Heather, which I picked because it's such a pretty name - I just found out, incidentally, that my mother named me after Deborah Kerr because she admired her so." "I worry about making mistakes in bringing up a child, but it makes me so happy to have one. I want to bring her up with love. I think if you bring someone up with love she will turn out well, and I want to bring mine up to have confidence so she will be able to say what she thinks and not be afraid of anyone. So she will be able to stand on her own."