

Ben and Me

by

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Curtain rises on a darkened stage.

Left, the bedroom. A dim light illuminates the bed where JANE ROTH, middle aged, and her husband John sleep.

Center right, a contemporary living room: couch, chair, coffee table, side tables and lamp. A book case, stuffed full of books, dominates the room. A laptop sits on the coffee table along side a pile of well thumbed books.

Far right, a rocking chair hides in the darkness.

BEN FRANKLIN walks on the center of the stage and for the clueless among us, a spotlight surrounds him. Ben smiles, bows, nods cordially before taking out a pocket watch. He exams and returns it before eyeing the sleeping lady.

BEN

I know what you are thinking, dear audience. I once said: early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.

That was before I turned eighty. Trust me on this: As far as sleep goes, an eighty year old has much in common with an infant. These days it is more like: Early to bed, late to rise and Good God damn, I still can't open my eyes!

Oh yes, tis usually true. But not tonight. Tonight I feel the weight of time on my shoulders, and with that burden, a strong sense of urgency. Jane needs to get up. *(He moves to wake Jane up.)* Wake up, dear lady.

JANE

Ben? Ben! You again... Oh. My. God. What time is it? Three o'clock in the morning! *(She collapses back against the pillows.)* I just want a good night sleep. I can't write anything without sleep. That is, anything worth reading. And my kids, John, the dog.

BEN

(Ben looks around.) You don't have a dog!

JANE

I would, if only I had the energy to take care of one. Please Ben, please go away.

Jane closes her eyes. Ben turns a crestfallen face to the audience. A long moment of silence follows.

BEN

Dear lady, are you still awake?
Our time is but an hour glass turned upside down.

JANE

(Jane sits up.) An hour glass turned... upside down? Who writes like that? That's like romance novel speak--

Jane's husband stirs in his sleep.

BEN

You need to get up; we need to get started--

JANE

Shhh! John's got a big trial tomorrow.

BEN

(Draws back, surprised) A trial? Your husband's a lawyer?

JANE

Yes, he is.

BEN

I am sorry!

JANE

Very funny.

BEN

You know what Shakespeare said. Kill the lawyers first. Which, if you think about it, is a surprising thing to have come from that ancient pen, for Shakespeare, having lived a full two centuries earlier, could neither have known or conceived of John Adams.

JANE

Ben, I can't write the play. I've told you--

BEN

I know, I know. You told me that I had a life full of importance and riches, the coin of which was historical antidotes, one after another--

JANE

Just let me go back to sleep--

BEN

Yet, I kept thinking about it, this play of yours.

Ben turns to address the audience, while Jane falls back against the pillows, placing one over her head in desperation.

BEN CONT'D)

At first I thought, A play, you say! Of course modesty demands some disparaging adjuration of unworthiness, but since you've quite set your mind to this task, I am at your service, madame! I will assist this noble endeavor in any way I can. Did I say noble? Curse my conceit!

JANE

Let me at least grant you freedom from modesty.

BEN

An overrated virtue, for sure. I cannot boast of much success in acquiring the reality of this virtue, but, my God, I know how to create the appearance of it.

Jane rises with exasperation and grabs Ben, leading him into the living room where she turns to confront the older man.

JANE

I keep going over it and over it. There's just no way to make this play work.

BEN

No?

JANE

You had a one of the greatest of all American lives, everyone thinks so, just everyone. In fact Ben Franklin is widely considered every thinking person's favorite founding father--

BEN

Indeed! More so than, say... Thomas Jefferson?

JANE

Jefferson's a close second. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are hard to top, Ben, even for you. In fact the reach of Jefferson's prose seem quite unmatched in all of history, lifting up a whole people to liberty and democracy--

BEN

My dear lady, I do hope you realize that these shining documents were not ah, originally so grand.

JANE

I know, I know! The edits of your very own pen perfected them. Starting from the top of the Declaration of Independence. You changed Jefferson's We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable to We hold these truths to be self evident...

Jane sighs with appreciation of Ben's brilliance, retuning to:

But about our play. I just don't have sense of any structure, much less a story--

Off stage:

CHILD (O.S.)

Mom, Mom?

JANE

What?

CHILD (O.S.)

I'm thirsty.

JANE

Coming. *(To Ben:)* That's my son.

BEN

Sons. Dear Lady, I would prefer to exclude even mentioning William in our play. The only thing I regret more in my life, besides my travels with John Adams, is my son's disastrous alignment with Britain during the war.

JANE

That was sad. You of all patriots!

BEN

Into every life a little rain must fall.

JANE

You never said that!

BEN

I would have, had I thought of it.

Returning to the constitution. I was thinking perhaps the play could center on the creation of that celebrated document?

Jane gets a glass and fills it with water.

JANE

I don't know... My favorite story about you and the constitution is when the first continental congress began editing it--

BEN

(Nods excitedly:) Mr. Jefferson's first draft was rather... long. *(Yawns dramatically.)* If you get my drift. The good men of congress began slicing away sentences and then, encouraged by these improvements, whole paragraphs followed.

JANE

Poor Jefferson! He grew increasingly distressed! You consoled him with that famous story.

BEN

(Chuckles, rocks back on his heels:) I know just the one!

Stage darkens, Ben stands alone in the spotlight.

BEN (CONT'D)

When I was a young printer, a friend started out in the hat making business and he wanted a sign for his shop. He composed it in these words, "John Thompson, hatter, makes and sells hats for ready money," with a figure of a hat subjoined. Mr. Thompson next sent it to friends for their amendments. The first friend thought the word 'Hatter' tautologous, because it was followed by the words makes hats. It was struck out. The next friend observed that the word 'makes' ought to be omitted, because his customers would not care who made the hats. A third said he thought the words 'For ready money' were useless, as all who bought a hat were expected to pay at the time of purchase. The inscription now read, "John Thompson sells hats." "Sells hats!" Said another friend; "Why nobody expects you to give them away!" That was stricken out and the word hat followed as there was already one painted on the board. So his inscription was reduced ultimately to "John Thompson," with the figure of a hat subjoined.

JANE

(Laughs:) To this day that story is read in writing glasses all over the world.

Forgetting her son, she drains the glass of water, herself.

BEN

Wouldn't that be enough for a play? The creating of the constitution, the very foundation for our great country?

JANE

(*Shrugs:*) A whole play about you and the making of the constitution... You did play an important role in both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, didn't you? (*Accusing:*) Wasn't it your idea to have the House of Representatives be representational to population, while each state got two Senators for the Senate?

BEN

Of course I always favored proportional representation, but that particular compromise was, I'm afraid, necessary to cross the finish line.

JANE

Cross the finish line? I don't think you would use those words, Ben.

BEN

But I just did!

JANE

Doesn't make it right.

BEN

Sometimes, in my advanced age, I find myself in the midst of confusion...

JANE

We were talking about the disproportional representation in the Senate. It's was a brilliant solution, Ben if only it worked. When I think that a state like South Dakota with its population of less than a million has the same political weight as New York or--

BEN

Yes, yes, but it was the best we could do. Compromise was the very order of the day.

JANE

Compromise is not good ingredient for play.

BEN

But essential, absolutely, for a constitution.

JANE

Was it the most contentious issue?

BEN

Heavens no! Voting was. Most of the delegates held that only those who owned property should be eligible to vote--

JANE

(Perks up with sudden interest:) That's right! Until you straightened them out.

BEN

Someone had to!

Jane rushes to the book shelves, and withdraws a book, quickly flipping through the pages.

JANE

I remember reading about the whole thing. Pinkney of South Carolina stood and said, "It was essential that members of the legislature, executive branch and the judges should be possessed of competent property to make them independent and respectable."

Franklin rose in opposition--

The stage goes dark and the spotlight surrounds Ben:

BEN

My dear Sirs, if honesty were often the companion of wealth and if poverty was exposed to peculiar temptation, it is not less true that the possession of property increased the desire of more property. Why, my God, some of the greatest rogues I've ever known were the richest ones!

We all, each of us, knows this. And I would also remind you that the poorest amongst us have the same claim to life and liberty as the most opulent!

The lights go on again. Jane slaps her hand on the couch arm rest.

JANE

You showed those stuffed coats. The whole country would have been so different without you, Ben!

BEN

Actually, my real influence was in the signing of the thing. Once it was written, every delegate had multiple objections to this or that and more often than not, both this and that. No one was willing to sign it--

JANE

That's right. Then you gave that other speech! Oh, I love that one. It's so you, so Ben Franklin...

The stage goes dark; the spotlight returns to Ben.

BEN

Mr. President, I confess there are several parts of this constitution which I do not at present approve, but I am not sure I will never approve them. For, having lived long, I have experienced many incidents of being obliged by better information or fuller consideration to change opinions, even on important subjects, which I once thought right, but found to be otherwise. It is therefore the older I grow, the more apt I am to doubt my own judgement and to pay more respect to the judgement of others. It is a steadfast truth that most men, as well as most religions, think themselves in possession of all truth, a maximum that reminds me of a story.

JANE

Everything always reminded you of a story.

BEN

You interrupted me, dear lady.

JANE

Oh, sorry. Go on.

As Ben speaks, Jane stares distractedly at the empty rocking chair before returning to Ben's speech.

BEN

Steele, a protestant Reverend, finally met the Pope of the Roman Church and said to that esteemed man: The only difference between our churches is that the Church of Rome is infallible and the Church of England is never in the wrong.

Jane laughs at Ben's joke.

And, though many private persons think almost as highly of their own infallibility as their sect, few express it as well as a certain French lady, who in a dispute with her sister, said, I don't know how it happens sister, but I meet with no body but myself that's always in the right.

JANE

(laughs:) Amazing! You were essential for the constitution, the declaration of independence, and God knows, you practically orchestrated the whole of the revolution, itself!

BEN

My dear lady, I spent far more energy trying to prevent it.

JANE

Still, John Adams was terrified when historians wrote our story, you would steal the show. I remember a funny quote from him...

*She gets another book from the shelve
and after finding the passage reads
John Adams words:*

JANE (CONT'D)

Adams wrote: The history of our revolution will be one continued lie from one end to other. The essence of the whole will be that Dr. Franklin's electrical rod smote the earth and that sprung General Washington. That Franklin electrified him with his rod--and thence forward these two conducted all the policy, negotiations, legislatures and war. *(Laughter from Ben and Jane, quieted as Jane shakes her head:)* Ben, this is exactly what I mean. Your life, wonderful and meaningful as it was, has all these interesting antidotes, precious moments that illuminate not just your remarkable character, but that momentous time in history. I just don't think it is enough for a play.

BEN

I don't understand. This exemplary, even candescent life, as you yourself describe it, is somehow unworthy of setting pen to paper?

*Ben turns to address the audience as
the stage goes dark and a spotlight
falls on him.*

I employ the infinitely superior Socratic method of disputation. You see over time I discovered the plain fact that arguments and contradicting people produced disgusts and even enmities. Persons of good sense seldom fall into it, except Mr. Adams and well, other Harvard men. Instead I have found it invaluable to put on the humbler enquirer and reflect the error of my adversary's thinking in a seemingly innocent question.

JANE

No, of course your life is most deserving of a pen to paper. At least in biographical form. And look-- *(She points to a book case)* Just some of your many biographies.

Ben moves to examine these books.

But your life just doesn't fit into a play. A play requires an over arching theme, of course...

*Ben picks up Walter Issacson's book,
and reads the title out loud...*

BEN

An American Life...

JANE

An American life? (*Nods:*) That's certainly a worthy theme, one skillfully exploited in that excellent book. You do represent the best of the American character, of America itself--

Ben looks as pleased as a well fed king.

BEN

Do I?

JANE

Oh yes! (*Excited:*) The bounty of your wit and wisdom, your irrepressible humor, your brilliant inventiveness and ingenuity, and even deeper character traits.

BEN

Yes? Such as?

JANE

The way you married individualism and civic society. You started the first fire department, hospital and the first insurance company. That was your idea, an insurance company!

Maybe we shouldn't mention that.

You also proposed institutions to house the mentally retarded, and these should be paid for by a tax on authors as they happen to get a greater share of intelligence at birth just as the retarded get less. (*Jane laughs, delighted.*) You initiated lending libraries, started schools and universities. Then, there's your celebration of equality for all and meritocracy, which, my God, is the most American of all ideas. And of course your great, unwavering contempt for anything smacking of the aristocracy. Your idea, Ben, became America's truth.

BEN

That was the great thing about the war, the way it once and forever severed all undeserved privileges and entitlements of the aristocracy and of course, the monarchy. Let's not forget those villains!

In fact that contempt, that deep mistrust of power and authority is very American, is it not? Which reminds me. The other day my friend was on a plane populated with two dozen members of the so called Saudi Arabian royal family, despots all. Once the plane landed in New York, this friend of mine rose to disembark.

"Sir," a servant of the group commanded, "You must wait until the royal family has disembarked." "Huh!" My friend scoffed, "Not in this country I don't." And he marched proudly and righteously off the plane.

JANE

Ben, that's my friend, not yours. My story, not yours.

BEN

Mine, yours, it matters not. The point is he reminded you of me. In fact when he told you this story, you thought, that is exactly what Ben would have done. Then you imagined one of your favorite scenes, drawn from my life.

JANE

Which one is that?

BEN

Me standing in the receiving line of King Louie the XVI of France.

JANE

(Dreamy:) The French loved you so much! You were as popular as a rock star! Hundreds of people lined up every day just to catch a glimpse of you. You represented the birth of democracy to a great people still under the repressive rule of a king. The miniatures, medallions, engravings, prints, rings, all with your likeness, all the rage. Ben Franklin; the great hero of liberty. And in perfect keeping with your character, in that long receiving line of the king, you wore a plain coat and were wigless. The only person to ever appear before the king without a wig--

BEN

Wigs never fit me right, they were hot and they looked ridiculous--

JANE

I've read about this scene a dozen times, and all accounts mention that the King and you exchanged quite a few words, which, shocked everyone as it broke established protocol--

BEN

Oh that. *(Chuckles:)*

JANE

Everyone wonders what the King said to you?

BEN

He mentioned a chamber pot.

JANE

He what?

BEN

A particular pot he had his artisans make and gave as a present to the beautiful Comtesse Diane de Polignac. Apparently, the good lady had bored the King often with my praise. This chamber pot had my likeness inside. He asked me how it felt, knowing that this good lady was pissing daily on me--

JANE

How vulgar!

BEN

The king was famously indecorous indeed.

JANE

But what did you say? How did you respond?

BEN

I said at least I know who is pissing on me.

Jane falls into the sofa laughing.

JANE

That is exactly what I imagined you'd say!

BEN

I know, I know...

Jane pauses thoughtfully, before:

JANE

There is something else about that period of your life in France I've always wondered about. I'm not the only one, either.

BEN

What?

JANE

Your meeting with Voltaire.

BEN

Ah, yes.

JANE

Arguable, the two greatest minds of the time, sharing the same exalted place in history as the champions of enlightenment and liberty. They say you were the American Voltaire--

BEN

American Voltaire? Perhaps he was the French Franklin!

JANE

You know what I mean.

BEN

Indeed. Voltaire was a great man by any day's standard.

JANE

More than one historian would love to know what happened between you two, but you made no record of it, and neither did he. It's a mystery.

BEN

Is it?

JANE

So what happened? What did you talk about? (*Excited:*) This could be a good subject of a play, the historic meeting between Ben Franklin and Voltaire!

BEN

Yes, perhaps...

JANE

Tell me what happened?

BEN

What do you think happened?

JANE

I don't know; I keep thinking about it. (*Pause.*) My god, this is the trouble! I cannot get you out of my head! Do you know when I first fell in love with you? It was when I read your address to congress on slavery.

The stage goes dark; the spotlight again finds Ben:

BEN FRANKLIN

Aye, at long last men will be shielded from tyranny by the noble idea of inalienable rights, that of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. And yet by silent agreement we have excluded the Negro from his God given liberty, the most basic of all liberties, that of owning his own bones, his own muscles, of owning his own mental and moral powers. And I warn you now this exclusion will someday rip this country apart and the gulf that comes to divide us will be filled with the spilt blood of our sons...

Jane nods; appears solemn.

JANE

Of course you recognized the pernicious evil that was slavery way before others.

BEN

I think every thoughtful person recognized it, dear lady.

JANE

Not Jefferson. He might have written those famous words. What were they? The metaphor of the wolf.

BEN

We have got the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation on the other.

JANE

The fact remains that he always owned slaves.

BEN

Jane, dear, I owned slaves at one point.

JANE

You loathed the experience; you objected to every aspect of it.

BEN

Quite true! The consequences of slavery, horrible cruelty and suffering, was just the beginning. I found the owning slaves made the owners... well, lazy.

JANE

You got rid of your slaves.

BEN

Actually, they ran away. In London. I just didn't fetch them home.

JANE

You made sure they were all right and you remained friends your whole life. You founded schools for African American children first in Philadelphia and then across America. Then, you became the president of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery. You wrote that hysterical parody where the Muslim ruler--

BEN

Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim.

JANE

Where he uses the exact same arguments Southerners used to justify slavery to justify the enslavement of Christians, making it both a right and duty of Muslims to have Christian slaves. Oh, that was a good one!

BEN

Yes, yes, but the point is, dear lady, many otherwise good people owned slaves in my time. George Washington--

JANE

Yes, he did, but against his family's expressed wishes, upon his death, he freed all of them and left money for their education. Not so Jefferson.

BEN

(*Nods:*) My understanding of the pernicious evil that is slavery, as you call it, changed when I witnessed first hand the performance of black children in schools. It completely altered my mind on the subject. I tried to discuss it with Jefferson.

JANE

(*Interested:*) I always imagined that!

The spotlight falls to an elegant table where Ben and THOMAS JEFFERSON dine.

BEN

At these schools, the performance of Negro children surpass my highest expectation and caused me to alter my opinion of the natural capacities of the black race.

JEFFERSON

Really!

BEN

Negro children are no different than white children. No different, I say! Their comprehension is as quick, their memory as strong and their reading the same.

JEFFERSON

Surely, Dr. Franklin, you exaggerate.

BEN

On the contrary, I do not, I assure you! (*Pause:*) I see the idea makes you uncomfortable?

JEFFERSON

Not discomfort, dear man. What you are witnessing is skepticism.

BEN

Why so?

JEFFERSON

Simply put: My experience runs contrary.

BEN

Could it be that your experience is determined by your self interest, that being a slave owner has stolen your reason?

JEFFERSON

I beg your pardon, doctor Franklin!

BEN

(Kindly:) Many a wise people have come to observe--not believe, but observe that the Negro races' inferiority is owing to a lack of opportunity for the development of their genius, rather than any inherent traits or faults. And I have noticed that, curiously, one never find this wisdom in slaveowners.

JEFFERSON

Dr. Franklin, you do me a grave injustice. No person living wishes more sincerely to see a complete refutation of these doubts and to find that Negroes are on a par with ourselves. At last, my doubts are the result of my own personal observation of a lifetime.

BEN

Well, then at least you would agree that education would greatly improve their mental faculties, would you not?

JEFFERSON

Yes, of course. But by how much? The answer to the question depends upon the individual, but in general the improvement would not be enough to grant them equality under the law.

BEN

I heartily disagree, sir and I am confident that time will prove me right. Yet, even if you disagree with that assertion, I must ask: is the subjugation of one people by another based simply on the exercise of greater intellectual talents?

Jefferson pauses uncomfortably.

BEN (CONT'D)

Of course not! If it were so, then Sir Isaac Newton, armed with his much superior understanding of our world, would have been lord and master of us all, would he not? Rights, Mr. Jefferson, are not based on talents...

The lights come on again as Jane leaps off the couch.

JANE

You were too kind, Ben! He knew just how evil it was and yet, he still owned human beings his whole life. Don't you see? Thomas Jefferson owned slaves. Owned them!

It would be as if a PETA member owned a hamburger joint or the Dalai Lama supported war.

Jane appears distracted.

BEN

Who is this PETA fellow?

JANE

Just some nutty organization.

BEN

What makes them nutty?

JANE

I don't know. They run around advocating kindness and compassion for animals.

Ben scratches his head in confusion.

BEN

And Mr. Lama?

JANE

He's the head of the Tibetan Buddhists, a very wise man. Actually you and he have a lot in common.

BEN

Yet he supported war?

JANE

Oh no. He is a great pacifist.

BEN

I wish more people understood, fully grasped, the barbarity of war. I always said there's never been a good war or a bad peace.

JANE

So true! I love that bible story you made up. I love all the bible stories you made up, which more often than not were better than the real ones. (*Chuckles:*) People use to spend hours looking for your Bible stories in the Bible, never realizing they were figments of your imagination. And that was a particularly good one, the one about the angels and war.

Stage goes dark; spotlight comes to Ben

BEN

A young angel of distinction was sent down to earth for the first time and an old spirit was to serve as his guild. They arrived over the Seas of Martinico--

JANE

Where?

BEN

This was where the British beat back the French in the West Indies.

Jane shakes her head.

JANE

If this were used in a play, we'd have to just leave it blank, to be filled in with the name of whatever is the most recent war.

BEN

That statement is laden with horror and tragedy. Why is war a seemingly irresistible component of human nature?

JANE

For now you can use Iraq or Afghanistan.

BEN

Iraq or Afghanistan?

JANE

Don't ask.

BEN

Very well.

Jane mouths the words as he speaks.

BEN

The guide brings the angel over Iraq, when through the clouds of smoke he saw the fire of guns, the streets shorn with mangled limbs, the bodies dead and dying, the buildings burning or blown into the air, and an unimaginable quantity of pain, misery, destruction. The angel turned to his guild, 'You blundering blockhead! You undertook to conduct me to earth, and instead you have brought me to hell!

'No, sir. This is no mistake; this really is earth and these are men. Devils never treat one another in this cruel manner! They have more of what men vainly call humanity.'

Jane stares dreamily at Ben, before slapping her head with frustration.

JANE

See? This is exactly what I'm talking about! These stories do not make a play.

BEN

Not a play?

JANE

We have a theme, endless stories, and even the rarest of all theatrical attributes, depth. We have everything, but an over-arching story. Your life has no story.

BEN

This seems a minor complaint, one easily dismissed--

JANE

Not to a writer.

BEN

What is a story, but a tale with a beginning, middle and an end? Just start at the beginning.

JANE

I've tried, Ben.

BEN

Try again. If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

JANE

You never said that, either.

BEN

No, but in this case I added the ending. If at first you don't succeed, try doing it the way your wife told you to do it in the first place.

Seriously dear lady, try again.

JANE

(Struggling:) I did think of one beginning, but I didn't really know where to go with it.

BEN

What was it?

JANE

I imagined Mark Twain reading his famous essay about you. In this way he introduces you to the theater audience. It would set an interesting tone, too.

Stage goes dark; MARK TWAIN appears in the spotlight.

MARK TWAIN

Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow.

Ben Franklin. Here is a character unfortunately known to every American boy only too well. The subject of this memoir was of a vicious disposition, and early prostituted his talents to the invention of maxims and aphorisms calculated to inflict suffering upon the rising generation of all subsequent ages.

BEN

Is he talking about me?

Jane nods. Ben enjoys a chuckle. Mark Twain nods at him, smiling.

JANE

Shhh!

MARK TWAIN

His simplest acts, also, were contrived with a view to their being held up for the emulation of boys forever--boys who might otherwise have been happy.

BEN

It is! It is about me!

Ben chuckles more.

MARK TWAIN

It was in this spirit that he became the son of a soap-boiler; and probably for no other reason than that the efforts of all future boys who tried to be anything might be looked upon with suspicion unless they were the sons of soap-boilers. With a malevolence which is without parallel in history, he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smouldering fire, so that all other boys might have to do that also or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown up to them.

Ben slaps his knee with bone tickling amusement.

MARK TWAIN (CONT'D)

Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a habit of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at meal time, another thing which has brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin's pernicious biography.

BEN

Pernicious biography. (*Laughs uproariously.*) That's very funny.

Mark Twain tips his hat, grinning at this, new and unlikely fan.

MARK TWAIN

His maxims were full of animosity toward boys. Nowadays a boy cannot follow out a single natural instinct without tumbling over some of those everlasting aphorisms and hearing from Franklin on the spot. If he buys two cents worth of peanuts, his father says, "Remember what Franklin has said, my son,-- 'A penny a day's over three dollars a year;'" and the comfort is all gone out of those peanuts. If he wants to spin his top when he is done work, his father quotes, "Procrastination is the thief of time." If he does a virtuous action, he never gets anything for it, because "Virtue is its own reward." And that boy is hounded to death and robbed of his natural rest, because Franklin said once in one of his inspired flights of malignity--

Early to bed and early to rise
Make a man healthy and wealthy and wise.

As if it were any object to a boy to be healthy and wealthy and wise on such terms! The sorrow that maxim has cost me through my parents' experimenting on me with it, tongue cannot tell. The legitimate result is my present state of general debility, indigence, and mental aberration.

*Ben nearly falls over with his
laughter. Mark Twain nods,
encouragingly.*

MARK TWAIN (CONT'D)

My parents used to have me up before nine o'clock in the morning, sometimes, when I was a boy. If they had let me take my natural rest, where would I have been now? Keeping store, no doubt, and respected by all.

And what an adroit old adventurer the subject of this memoir was! In order to get a chance to fly his kite on Sunday, he used to hang a key on the string and let on to be fishing for lightning. And a guileless public would go home chirping about the "wisdom" and the "genius" of the hoary Sabbath-breaker. If anybody caught him playing "mumble-peg" by himself, after the age of sixty, he would immediately appear to be ciphering out how the grass grew--as if it was any of his business. My grandfather knew him well, and he says Franklin was always fixed--always ready. If a body, during his old age, happened on him unexpectedly when he was catching flies, or making mud pies, or sliding on a cellar-door, he would immediately look wise, and rip out a maxim, and walk off with his nose in the air and his cap turned wrong side before, trying to appear absent-minded and eccentric.

Ben is laughing still.

JANE

(Rolling her eyes:) Ben, this just isn't working. It's too long. The language is kind of archaic. It is blah, blah, blah-

BEN

Blah? Blah, blah? What the devil does that mean?

JANE

Like, you know, the infamous yada, yada, yada.

BEN

Ah, that clarifies the muddled matter.

JANE

Blah and yada stand for dull and uninteresting. People repeat blah three times to signify skipping the middle part of a story or in this case a speech.

MARK TWAIN

(With exasperation:) Everybody's a critic. It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries, and congressmen, and we must bear the burden.

BEN

I am still confused, dear lady. Why would you skip the middle part of a speech or story? The middle part of both good speeches and stories are often the most important part.

MARK TWAIN

(Nods:) It does not take genius to concur with Dr. Franklin here. For instance, you would not say, "Ben Franklin never thought he'd live to tell the story of Ole Max, the meanest bear he ever wrestled, but he did. Blah, blah, blah, now, Ben and Max are old friends."

Ben laughs.

JANE

Unless the middle part of your story isn't, in fact, interesting enough to tell--

BEN

If so, then chances are the beginning and end of the story leave much to be desired as well. In which case, it would be best to just leave us with the point of the story: Ben Franklin has a winning way with bears.

Mark Twain laughs his approval.

BEN

And my point is I want to hear the rest of Mr. Twains essay.

JANE

I give up. By all means...

MARK TWAIN

He was a hard lot. He invented a stove that would smoke your head off in four hours by the clock. One can see the almost devilish satisfaction he took in it, by his giving it his name.

BEN

I did indeed!

MARK TWAIN

He was always proud of telling how he entered Philadelphia, for the first time, with nothing in the world but two shillings in his pocket and four rolls of bread under his arm. But really, when you come to examine it critically, it was nothing. Anybody could have done it.

BEN

(Laughs:) Anyone could have done it! Very funny!

MARK TWAIN

To the subject of this memoir belongs the honor of recommending the army to go back to bows and arrows in place of bayonets and muskets. He observed, with his customary force, that the bayonet was very well, under some circumstances, but that he doubted whether it could be used with accuracy at long range.

JANE

What's he talking about here? I have no idea what he is referring too?

BEN

You don't?

Jane shakes her head, but Ben only shrugs as he returns his attention to Mark Twain. Jane rolls her eyes heavenward again, as if for help.

MARK TWAIN

Benjamin Franklin did a great many notable things for his country, and made her young name to be honored in many lands as the mother of such a son.

BEN

Oh, now that is very flattering, dear man.

MARK TWAIN

It is not the idea of this essay to ignore that or cover it up. No; the simple idea of it is to snub those pretentious maxims of his, which he worked up with a great show of originality out of truisms that had become wearisome platitudes as early as the dispersion from Babel; and also to snub his stove, and his military inspirations, his unseemly endeavor to make himself conspicuous when he entered Philadelphia, and his flying his kite and fooling away his time in all sorts of such ways, when he ought have been foraging for soap-fat, or constructing candles. I merely desired to do away with somewhat of the prevalent calamitous idea among heads of families that Franklin acquired his great genius by working for nothing, studying by moonlight, and getting up in the night instead of waiting til morning like a Christian, and that this programme, rigidly inflicted, will make a Franklin of every father's fool.

It is time these gentlemen were finding out that these execrable eccentricities of instinct and conduct are only the evidences of genius, not the creators of it. I wish I had been the father of my parents long enough to make them comprehend this truth, and thus prepare them to let their son have an easier time of it. When I was a child I had to boil soap, notwithstanding my father was wealthy, and I had to get up early and study geometry at breakfast, and peddle my own poetry, and do everything just as Franklin did, in the solemn hope that I would be a Franklin some day. And here I am.

BEN

(Applauding;) Well done, young man! Well done!

JANE

This only proves my point, Ben. Even if somehow I came up with a beginning, say some better, more inventive beginning than that and then a middle and end, I'm still convinced it's impossible. There's dozens of examples of the difficulties--

BEN

Yes? Yes, like what?

JANE

(Musing:) Well, mostly of squeezing into a play all the aspects of your life that... well, define your character, that illustrate you, Ben Franklin. Because none of these things yield to the stage.

BEN

I cannot imagine what you mean.

JANE

I don't know. Like, well like your confrontation with the Paxton boys!

BEN

Christian white savages, you mean.

JANE

The way you stopped them! This is Ben Franklin, a small snapshot that illuminates the man. But how can it work on stage?

BEN

I didn't stop them the first time, you know. These barbarians caught and savagely bludgeoned to death twenty innocent Indians.

JANE

But you stopped them the second time! The second time it wasn't just a handful of settlers, it was a whole mob, over five-hundred men bent on slaughtering the community of a hundred and forty peaceful Indians there in Philadelphia. The King refused to allow Philadelphia a militia, for obvious reasons, and the governor was utterly defenseless. He sent word to the nearest British regulars, and then, swallowing his deep antagonism toward you, being a royalist and therefore, no friend of Ben Franklin, he pounded on your door just after midnight, deploring you to try to stop them. And you did, you did! This is the Ben Franklin I love. You mustered some soldiers and artillery before rushing out to meet the mob--

The stage goes dark and the spotlight comes to Ben Franklin. The sound of a rancorous mob sound loud and menacing. Ben holds up both hands, in a call for silence. Cupping his eyes, he looks out over the crowd. He takes in a man, and pretends a great surprise.

BEN

Jacob Townsend? Is that you, my good man?

JACOB VO

Yes sir.

BEN

My word, is not your dear Mary about to give birth? You should be at her side, rather than gallivanting around in the middle of the night like a madman.

JACOB VO

(*Contrite:*) Yes sir.

BEN

And you Kyle Rhodes, do you not have enough to preoccupy your time with the harvest upon you and seven hungry mouths to feed?

KYLE VO

Mister Franklin.

BEN

My god gentlemen, what is going on here? This be sheer madness, for sure. There's no sense in the killing of innocent, peaceful Christian Indians, indeed killing any Indians and if there is no sense in it, no good can come of it, believe me.

MAN'S VOICE

They ain't innocent! God damn savages killed that family out by the river bank--

BEN

Did you see this killing?

No answer.

BEN (CONT'D)

Did you, or did you not?

MAN'S VOICE

No.

BEN

You did not. It is one of hundreds of hateful rumors, passed by one angry or disgruntled person to another, the truth trampled more with each telling. Yet, even if there was a killing somewhere far away, what dear God, has that to do with these peaceful and innocent Indians here? If an Indian injures me, does it follow that I may revenge that injury on all Indians? The only crime of these poor wretches seems to have been that they had a reddish-brown skin and black hair. If it be right to kill men for such reason, then should any man with a freckled face and red hair kill a wife or child of mine, it would be right for me to revenge it by killing all the freckled red-haired men, women and children?

In short I would remind you that even barbarians practice their barbarism only against their enemies, not their friends.

Jane jumps up and grabs a book from the shelf, flipping through the pages.

JANE

Then, then, the crowd dispersed, the crisis resolved. You returned home. In a letter you later wrote of the night, "Your old friend was a valiant soldier, a heroic councilor, a grand ambassador to a country mob and of returning home to my wife, a nobody again."

Jane pauses, before throwing herself on the couch.

JANE

See? How could you ever fit that fantastic scene into a play?

BEN

Yes, this is your challenge!

JANE

Then you'd want to add that famous essay you wrote in Europe about Indians.

BEN

Which is that?

JANE

You know, the one about the European's prejudices concerning the Savages of North America.

BEN

Oh yes, I remember that.

Spotlight comes to Ben:

BEN

Savages we call them because their manners differ from ours, which we think the perfection of civility; they think the same of theirs. The Indian men, when young, are hunters and warriors; when old counsellors; for all their government is by counsel of the sages; there is no force, there are no prisons, no officers to compel obedience or inflict punishment. Hence they generally study oratory, the best speaker having the most influence. The Indian women till the ground, dress the food, nurse and bring up the children, and preserve and hand down to posterity the memory of public transactions. These employments of men and woman are accounted natural and honorable. Having few artificial wants, they have abundance of leisure for improvement by conversation. Our laborious manner of life, compared with theirs, they esteem slavish and base; the learning on which we value ourselves they regard as frivolous and useless.

JANE

That speech is centuries ahead of its time. But how could you include it in a play?

Jane's pacing speaks of her exasperation:

There's so many more difficulties, too.

BEN

Difficulties? What can you mean?

JANE

How to include or, I don't know, somehow convey the multifaceted aspect of your life, what one of your biographers called... a harmonious human multitude in a single person.

BEN

I'm still not sure what ah, aspect you are worrying on?

JANE

To this day, you're considered the patron saint of the self help movement. Your moral perfect project, for instance. How could one possibly explicate that in a theater setting?

BEN

My moral perfection project! *(Smiles:)* The ambitious undertaking proved far more difficult than I ever imagined in any case. I dare say, I never got very far with it.

JANE

(Laughs:) And this much celebrated and ridiculed endeavor--

BEN

Ridiculed?

JANE

Oh yes! It is so fantastically revealing of you, your unique character. Everyone talks about it.

BEN

I don't see this at all.

Jumping up again, Jane rushes to the book case. She removes another book, and flips through it.

JANE

The way you made a list of thirteen virtues. Then, you made a chart with seven columns for the days of the week. You marked them off as you imagined you had mastered them.

Jane finds the list.

Here it is--the list!

BEN

(Whispers to audience:) Please do not mention chastity.

A game springs between them:

JANE

Temperance.

BEN

A full *belly* makes for a dull mind. This might explain our audience tonight!

JANE

Silence.

BEN

Once I was in a packed church, and taking a brief respite from wakefulness, I was suddenly roused by the Reverend's injunction, "Never speak unless you can improve upon the silence!" I was so struck by these words, I shouted out, My God, I should never speak again!

JANE

(Laughs:) Order.

BEN

Like silence, I always considered it a worthy virtue, though one I rarely practiced. I eventually decided I was far too busy and had such a fine memory, so as to be satisfied with but a semblance of tidiness.

JANE

Frugality.

BEN

Beware of little expenses, a small leak will sink a great ship--

JANE

(Reflexes; muses:) There are dozens of your clever little sayings about money and frugality, but for all of that, you were always excessively generous. For much of your life, you received hundreds of letters from all over the world, begging you for help. You rarely failed these faraway people. Indeed you gave up your whole bank account for the revolutionary war.

BEN

I loved my country far more than money, dear lady.

JANE

That's what I see though: all your so called virtues are like that, self-revelatory in often surprising ways.

BEN

(Praying; whispers:) Please don't mention chastity...

JANE

I suppose none more than...

Ben tenses.

JANE

Industry.

Ben appears visibly relieved.

JANE

Like, my god, you literally cannot count all your scientific interests and your actual contributions to science? Legion! The list of your inventions is a mile long.

BEN

Well..

Ben rocks back on his heels, embarrassed somewhat as Jane withdraws another Franklin biography from the shelf, and flips through the pages.

JANE

*(Fast:)*bifocal glasses:

BEN

My most useful invention, for sure.

JANE

Copperplate press design--

BEN

That revolutionized printing!

JANE

A copy machine design--

BEN

I would never be so immodest myself, but most people consider it far superior and more practical than Mr. Jefferson's design.

JANE

Musical instruments--

BEN

Three of those, but none more successful than the harmonica.

JANE

Both Beethoven and Mozart composed for it.

BEN

Did you know at one point the harmonica factory employed over a hundred people!

JANE

You also invented countless new words: colonize, unshakable, etc. And then, hundreds of French words--

BEN

(Smiles:) To amuse the ladies.

JANE

Daylight savings idea--

BEN

My word! That was just a satirical essay! I never imagined you people would take the idea seriously.

Ben waves his hand in a circular movement, as if to say: Moving along...

JANE

A hot water system design, street lights, the famous lightning rod. How many lives did that save? Thousands?

Ben shrugs.

JANE

A mechanical arm, a phonetic alphabet, storage battery, stove, swimming pads, typeface, a life saving urinary catheter--

BEN

No please. I see what you mean. Even I am bored.

She slams the book shut.

JANE

Ugh! You're so right. Lists don't work for theater! Listing all your accomplishments could never work! Melville said of you that Ben Franklin was everything, but a poet.

BEN

Not a poet? *(Laughs:)* Not for want of trying. Dear lady, go back to the beginning. How can we start this play?

JANE

Well... Thinking of beginnings, I also considered that the play might open with a scene drawn from your first appearance on the national stage, so to speak.

BEN

My apprenticeship at my brother James' printing shop?

JANE

Exactly. The Silence Dogooder letters. They're hysterical! They're so... you!

The stage goes dark again and the spotlight falls on Ben with Jane on the couch in the background.

BEN

As the youngest son of twelve siblings, my father had determined that I was destined for the clergy. This would require a formal education and subsequently, considerable expense, which of course meant Harvard.

JANE

Explain why you didn't end up at Harvard.

BEN

Yes, well. At some point my father realized that I was patently ill suited to the clergy.

JANE

You were born skeptical and irreverent. Issacson uses the wonderfully comical word puckish. As a young man you had read John Locke, Addison--

BEN

Who is telling this story, young lady?

JANE

Oh. Sorry.

BEN

The puritan faith inexplicably demands intolerably wordy and some might say, tedious sermons and graces. (*Yawns; to the audience*) Oh, you know what I mean?

Instead of dozing like most of my fellow parishioners, my father discovered the hidden book in my hands.

I was always falling short of his expectations: when, after salting the winter's provisions, I suggested that instead of saying grace nightly, my father should say Grace over the whole cask--once and for all-- that this would be a vast saving of time.

Because, you see, from the earliest age, I felt the rather profound and surprising absence of a personal God.

God was not residing above us, watching over creation with a benevolent eye, much less orchestrating our fates below, sending fortune to one fellow and troubles to another, bad weather there and a fair sky here. I, as a rational witness to the world, see God rather as creation itself--

Jane laughs, shaking her head.

JANE

I've been reading too much Robertson Jeffers, but Ben, Ben, get ye back to Silence Dogood.

BEN

Right. My father soon faced the unpleasant reality that an education would be wasted on me and he sent me to my brother James' printing shop. The work was dull as ditch water and tiresome, but I did not mind that. No, what made my apprenticeship intolerable was my brother James' large and petty tyrannies--

JANE

Did he really beat you?

BEN

He did indeed, and I'll tell you this, it was extremely hard to submit to his abuse.

JANE

Poor Ben! The pain--

BEN

Pain? A minor complaint. Dear God, no. I was stronger and taller by half a foot. I could have easily killed him with my bare hands. And indeed armed with means and motivation, I needed only the will.

My animosity increased dramatically every day he refused to consider my writing as worthy for print. I was a work horse, nothing more; I was certainly never to exercise my mind, much less my wit. Oh, this cut deep until...

Fate handed me a far sweeter revenge.

JANE

Silence Dogood!

BEN

She was the most fabulous character I ever created.

JANE

Fabulous? I don't think you would ever use that word; I believe it actually meant a fictitious character in your time.

BEN

I take your point. Humm... How about nifty?

JANE

That's even more modern!

BEN

Top-notch?

Jane looks alarmed.

BEN (CONT'D)

I'm teasing you, dear lady.

JANE

Very funny. The point is Silence Dogood made quite a splash in her day, saucy, full of wit and--

BEN

Yet intelligent and wise, speaking sense to power.

JANE

Read one of her pieces. Wait, wait. First give her back story.

BEN

Back story?

JANE

You know. Her history.

BEN

Oh. Well. Silence Dogood was born on board a ship sailing from London to New Hampshire--.

Jane leaps off he couch.

JANE

Wait! I've got it. Let's have Silence Dogood appear on stage and tell her story herself!.

BEN

(Taken aback.) A splendid idea!

JANE

Why she could even open the play; she could be the beginning!

BEN

How would she be the beginning?

JANE

See... She appears on stage, tells her story, and then, you appear as the author!

BEN

The author becomes a player on the stage? That seems... farcical.

JANE

Ben, you're so old fashion sometimes. Let's just try it.

BEN

Very well. (*Stands formally:*) My dear audience, may I present Mistress Silence Dogood.

Stage darkens and wearing the traditional colonel garb, into the spotlight steps...

SILENCE DOGOOD

Good evening, good evening. How do you do? Oh my, this is ever so exciting. So...

She searches the audience.

So, are you sure these good people are interested in my modest life?

JANE

Maybe not. We'll see how it goes.

SILENCE DOGOOD

My heart is fluttering like a hummingbird in flight.

Hands go to cheeks. Silence pauses uncomfortably, smiles stupidly.

BEN

Just start at the beginning, good woman.

SILENCE DOGOOD

The beginning?

BEN

Read the first letter.

SILENCE DOGOOD

Oh! Well, yes, a fine beginning. And, coincidentally, here it is, in my skirt pocket! (*She withdraws letter, smiles.*) At the time of my birth, my parents were on ship-board from London to New England.

My entrance into this troublesome world was attended with the death of my father, a misfortune, which tho' I was not then capable of knowing, I shall never be able to forget; for as he, poor man, stood upon the deck rejoicing at my birth, a merciless wave washed over the deck and in one moment carried him beyond reprieve.

JANE

Ben, really.

BEN

What's wrong?

JANE

That is so contrived!

BEN

Of course it is contrived! I made it up.

JANE

Yes, but we don't tell stories like that anymore.

BEN

How so, dear lady?

JANE

The man goes on deck to rejoice and a giant wave washes him out to sea? Please! It is too unlikely, too farfetched.

BEN

Unlikely? Farfetched? Why there's hardly a sea worthy ship that has not lost passengers in just this fashion!

JANE

At the very moment he was celebrating the birth of his first child?

BEN

It is that kind of dramatic detail that makes for a good story!

JANE

Dramatic? (*Scoffs:*) Ridiculous! Nobody writes like that anymore. Nowadays we layer our stories--

BEN

Layer?

JANE

(*Nods:*) We present the truth as needed; no one writes a sequential narration--

BEN

By sequential you mean beginning, middle and end?

JANE

Exactly. Some stories might start at the end or say, an event in the middle, and then work their way backwards, creating a richer, more nuanced texture--

SILENCE DOGOOD

Not my story! My story must start at the beginning, just as the creator intended.

Silence winks at Ben.

SILENCE DOGOOD

For how would we reach the middle, if not from the beginning?

BEN

(To Jane:) All this time, we've been searching for a beginning, middle and end--

JANE

Well, yes. But--

SILENCE DOGOOD

Backward story telling! It's all so very peculiar. No wonder you're so mixed up!

BEN

Indeed. My dear lady, Silence Dogood creates a fine story, one that she tells from the beginning, moving through the this initial phase of her life to reach the middle series of events, which in turn, leads us all the way to the happy end.

Silence nods approvingly, but Jane shakes her head.

JANE

You don't get it! Watch, I'll prove it. Silence, tell the real story behind your father's tragic end.

Alarm appears on Silence's face.

SILENCE DOGOOD

What can you mean?

JANE

Like, why did your mother and father leave London?

SILENCE DOGOOD

You mean his... gambling debts? My father owed a pretty sum not just to the butcher and the landlord, but to a number of the gaming houses. Still, we might have managed, moving about as we did, save for the ah, poisoned elixir...

BEN

(Gasp:) Poisoned elixir?

SILENCE DOGOOD

Dreadful story, that. You see, my father worked as a chemist of sorts, or so he fancied the title. His crowning glory was a tonic that eased the pain of arthritis. To his surprise he soon discovered what worked to relieve arthritis also, somewhat miraculously, relieved melancholy, headaches, stomach ailments, women's problems, toothaches, and why it occasionally even relieved the dying of that unfortunate state of affairs.

At least this is how my mother remembered father's sales pitch.

Oh, he made a pretty penny of his tonic, he did. My mother doesn't know who first began noticing that where ever my father sold his tonic, the undertakers' business began increasing, but still, she thought they might have been able to outrun the concerned parties, if not for my father's penchant for drink.

Oh he loved his cups, he did!

JANE

So your parents left London in a hurry.

SILENCE DOGOOD

There be a fire under their feet, for sure.

JANE

And once onboard, your mother gave birth to you.

SILENCE DOGOOD

She did indeed, and my father celebrated the same way he celebrated the sun rising in the morning, or likewise, dark rainy days. He goes topside, and well, our very own Mr. Franklin recorded a great long list of expressions for his state of affairs--

JANE

You mean Ben's list of hundreds of adjectives and phrases for inebriated?

SILENCE DOGOOD

Just the one.

JANE

No please. No more lists.

SILENCE DOGOOD

Very well. The phrase that suits here is: he was right before the wind with all his studded sails out and whoosh, he was swept into a stormy sea.

Pause.

BEN

Oh. My. God.

JANE

See? A modern story teller would want to know why Ms. Dogood's family left London and how it was that a man might be swept into the sea. Go on, Silence. Read the rest of your history.

SILENCE DOGOOD

The history as told by Mr. Franklin?

Jane nods.

SILENCE DOGOOD

Thus, my first day became my father's last; and my disconsolate Mother was at once made both a parent and a widow.

When we arrived at Boston (which was not long after) I was put to nurse in a country place, at a small distance from the Town, where I went to school, and I passed my childhood in vanity and idleness, until I was bound out apprentice, that I might no longer be a charge to my indigent mother, who was put to hard shifts for a living.

JANE

And ah, what kind of hard shifts were they?

SILENCE DOGOOD

Let's see. She kept house for one family, did the laundry for another and in her spare time she entertained her gentlemen friends.

Ben sinks into a chair.

BEN

Gentlemen friends?

SILENCE DOGOOD

Anyway, my master was a country minister, a pious good-natured young man, and a bachelor: he laboured with all his might to instill virtuous and godly principles into my tender soul, well knowing that it was the most suitable time to make deep and lasting impressions on the mind, while it was yet untainted with vice, free and unbiased. He endeavored that I might be instructed in all that knowledge and learning which is necessary for our sex, and denied me no accomplishment that could possibly be attained in a country place; such as all sorts of needle work, writing, arithmetic, etc., and observing that I took a more than ordinary delight in reading ingenious books, he gave me the free use of his library--

BEN

Wait, as I begin to get the gist of modern story telling, I fear that you're about to alert us as to the true nature of your minister husband--

SILENCE DOGOOD

Now, now Mr. Franklin, throughout history there's been a surprising disparity between marriage dates and the dates of the first born in families, mine is not the only one.

BEN

We always contended ourselves with imagining the scandalous details.

Jane yawns; she is beginning to get tired.

JANE

Modern storytelling has completely eliminated any need for imagination, I'm afraid. How about this then? Ms. Dogood, why not share with us why my dear friend, Ben, created you?

SILENCE DOGOOD

Oh that! Well that be an easy matter to relate. Ben created me in order to show up that sanctimonious son of a bitch, Mr. Cotton Matther.

BEN

(Laughs:) Quite true. Mr. Cotton Matther stood on a towering platform of Christian piety. I required some means to cut Mr. Matther down a peg--

Jane lays her head down on the couch.

JANE

Wow. I'm finally getting tired...

BEN

Wait dear lady, we're just getting to the good part...

The curtain closes. The scene appears in silhouette. Ben's voice sounds faint, distant, as if in a dream...

BEN

Jane, Jane? Are you asleep...

Captured in silhouette, a man and two children move about as Jane sleeps. The children grab backpacks, and rush out the door after their father.

The curtain opens to Jane waking on the couch. She rubs her eyes, disorientated, rising. She shuffles into the kitchen for coffee. A note is taped to the coffee pot.

Jane reads the note:

JANE

You overslept again! I managed to get the kids off to school, but we couldn't find where you put James' soccer shoes and Emily refused to eat the hot lunch today, and I didn't have time to fix them anything. Bring a lunch to Emily's recital--

A distress hand goes to Jane's hair.

JANE

Emily's recital! What time is it?

Jane gasps and in a panic, she flies into movement.

Curtain closes.

Curtain opens to the sound of Emily's piano recital of Mozart's Piano Sonata 16. Dressed in a pantsuit, Jane sits attentively in a chair, listening. Ben rushes up behind her.

BEN

My dear lady--

Jane tenses with surprise.

JANE

Not now, Ben!

BEN

What do you mean, not now?

JANE

This is my daughter's piano recital!

BEN

Never mind about that! I've got it!

JANE

Got what?

BEN

The beginning! The perfect beginning for our play.

Spotlight comes to Ben. He stands, hands on chair, but he pretends it is a ship's bulwark as the ship is caught in a violent storm. The piano music fades, but never disappears entirely. Though Jane is not in the spotlight, we see her caught in the spell of Ben's words.

Imagine this: My first trip to London. The fine ship sailed beneath blue skies and a strong wind, traveling the passage in record time. Yet, just twenty or so miles from the English shore, we ran into the most foul weather.

The blue sky darkened dramatically. Not a gray sky above, but ominously, a charcoal black sky. This harbinger of doom opened with a sudden deluge. The wind became fierce, giving rise to giant swells that lifted the ship up before tossing her violently down. Navigation became impossible.

Then true nightfall stole all vision. Between midnight and dawn we faced death a dozen times. The goodly wind turned into a gale force, blasting across the decks. The rain felt like stinging bullets against the cheek. Worst of all were the giant swells. There was no place safe: not below deck and not above. Women, children and older men were tied to their bunks. Everyone clung for dear life as these gargantuan waves turned us over. We held our cries in our breath, waiting for the ship to right herself again. At some dark point, the two main masts collapsed across the deck.

People's screams were nearly continuous. We were going down; we were going to die. You know how there are no atheists in a fox hole? Well, there are even fewer on a sinking ship.

Then the miracle. The ship suddenly crashed on rocks with a clamoring of wood against stone. The crew and I managed to free the other passengers and together we stumbled onto the sweet mercy of land, sinking to the stilled and unmoving earth.

We knew only a bone crushing exhaustion and deeply felt gratitude. One man, still on his hands and knees, weeping for all his joy, lifted his hands in prayer to the heavens and vowed to build a church in the very spot, as a means of showing our thanks to God almighty for our salvation.

I stood to my feet. A church, I scoffed.

Far better a lighthouse!

The piano pauses at the end of a movement, just as Jane leaps to her feet with applause:

JANE

Brilliant! Perfect! It is so you!

The piano stops. The spot light comes to bewildered Jane. We hear people murmur confusion and alarm. Bewilderment turns to mortification. A small voice says:

EMILY (O.S.)

Mom? But...I'm not done yet.

Hands go to cheeks:

JANE

Oh, dear....

Curtain.

Intermission.

Curtain rises.

Jane sits hard in a chair, with a thick book unfolded on her lap. Ben appears, as if by magic, before her.

JANE

Ben?

She looks anxiously in both directions. Whispers:

Not now.

BEN

Not now? You know what I always say, never put off to tomorrow what can be done today--

JANE

Ben, I'm having a conference with ah, Ms. Fernandez, my son's teacher. I'm next. And she scheduled me last. You know what that means.

BEN

I have no idea.

JANE

There's some kind of problem that needs to be 'discussed'.

Ben dismisses Jane's problem.

BEN

It's bound to work itself out, dear Lady.

JANE

I hope so...

Jane becomes animated, excited.

JANE

You know I was thinking about you all night. I finally figured out what the problem is! Your life and all its historic riches are simply too large for one play.

BEN

Indeed!

JANE

(Nods:) I was thinking, if I'm to write a play about you, I need to narrow the scope. I need to focus on one aspect of your life.

BEN

One aspect?

JANE

Something interesting. Something no one else really touches on.

BEN

What would that be?

Jane holds up the book.

JANE

The women in your life! I never read this biography! You had so many women! The most adventurous sex life!

BEN

Adventurous sex life? Good heavens, dear lady. People in my time would never choose those crass words.

JANE

Oh. Well, sure. Humm. Those are usual words. I just realized where they came from...

BEN

I can't imagine.

JANE

We had a president, you see--

BEN

A good president?

JANE

Even a great president. Our country saw both peace and prosperity during his years in office and well, apparently he too, had a rather adventurous sex life.

BEN

My god, do you know him? How would a lady know that?

JANE

Oh, Ben it was terribly unfortunate, but I'm afraid details of his affairs landed on the front page of the newspapers.

BEN

(Shocked:) The press discusses the president's adventurous sex life?

JANE

(Nods:) I wondered what you would say about it. The incident upset the whole country, too, until, some years later, after this great president's term was up, and a new president was elected, we were inundated with relentless bad news, just horrible news, Ben. Many people actually feared for our country. That's when I realized how much I'd rather read about the president's extracurricular activities than the world plunged into poverty, the environmental degradation the next president orchestrated and worse, the poor victims of the two wars he started.

BEN

Point well made, dear lady.

JANE

Anyway, I keep reading things people say about you and the ladies in your life.

BEN

What people would these be?

JANE

For instance, one of your lovers, Madame Brillon said of you: *(Reads from book:)* 'You combine the kindest heart, a lively imagination and that droll roguishness which shows that the wisest of men allows his wisdom to be perpetually broken against the rocks of femininity.'

BEN

Ah, I did so love that fine lady.

JANE`

You did love her?

BEN

Very much, indeed.

JANE

And here is another perceptive comment from one of your biographers, Carl Van Doren. He wrote:

'Without the brevity of ordinary lust, or the perseverance of obsession, they had a general warmth which, while no doubt sexual in origin, made them strong, tender, imaginative, and humorous beyond the reach of mere desire, with its hard, impersonal appetite. Always a person himself, Franklin treated every woman as if she were a person too, and made her feel more truly one than ever before. Because he loved, valued, and studied women, they were no mystery to him and he had no instinctive fear of them. Statesman and scientist, profoundly masculine, he took women into account as well as any other force of nature...'

Ben stares dreamily off into space.

JANE

People say that men use to hide their wives from you, for fear of a seduction. They say no woman between the ages of eight and eighty were safe from you. Or was it, no woman was safe from you from the time you turned eight all the way to eighty?

BEN

We could safely say the upper limit there was about seventy-eight.

JANE

(Laughs:) And that bit you wrote about older women--

MRS. FERNANDEZ, middle aged, holding a file, appears on stage and beckons to Jane.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Ms. Roth?

Jane follows Mrs. Fernandez through a door to a desk and chair. Mrs. Fernandez sits at the desk, Jane in the chair.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
It is so nice to finally meet James' mom.

JANE
(*Nervously:*) James just adores you. He's always going about Mrs. Fernandez this, Mrs. Fernandez that.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
He's a wonderful boy.

JANE
Thank you.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
He tells me you're a writer?

JANE
Yes, I'm afraid so.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
And what is it you write?

JANE
So far all my published work has been in magazines. A feature writer.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Oh! Anything I might be familiar with?

JANE
Recently? Let's see. I did a piece on the electoral college for the Times, a bit on the trends in e-publishing for the Sunday book review, and a longer piece on racial inequality post Obama for a popular blog.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
That's quite a variety!

JANE
I know, but then suddenly, well, this will sound so strange, but Ben Franklin walked into my life--

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Ben Franklin? How interesting! My favorite founding father.

BEN

I am everyone's favorite!

Jane rolls her eyes.

JANE

I'm thinking of writing a play about him.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Really! A play. About his life?

JANE

Actually, no. (*Excited:*) We all know about Ben's life: all his inventions, scientific accomplishments, and of course his countless contributions to country, but how about his love life? Did you know Ben Franklin had the most adventurous love life!

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Did he?

JANE

(*Nods:*) The way I see it, we--

MRS. FERNANDEZ

We? (*Confused.*)

JANE

I mean, you know, me. Anyway, I'm thinking what if we create the five main loves in Ben's life and present each lady's unique personality, characteristics and circumstances, maybe each lady is revealed in one defining scene, you see, and each scene begs the question, who did Ben love most?

MRS. FERNANDEZ

(*Still confused:*) Who. Did. Ben? Love most?

JANE

And at the end you somehow answer the question.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

You? Meaning the audience?

JANE

No, no, Ben. (*She points:*) He answers the question.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

So the whole play would be about the women who loved Ben Franklin?

JANE

And all the women he loved. For instance, I was just reading the letter Ben wrote to a gentleman friend, the one about marriage.

Jane holds up the book.

Have you read this?

Mrs. Fernandez shakes her head.

JANE

It's hysterical. Here let me read it to you. (*Excited:*) Now imagine Ben reading his famous letter, standing on stage.

Spotlight comes to Ben, who bows slightly.

BEN

My dear sir:

I know of no medicine fit to diminish the violent natural inclinations you mention--

Jane holds the book, and laughs.

JANE

Violent natural inclinations!

Mrs. Fernandez looks confused still.

JANE

You know, sex.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Sex.

JANE

You see, this man, a friend or someone, wrote to Ben and asked him what to do about sexual urges, given that he didn't want to get married. This letter is Ben's advice.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Ah huh.

Spotlight returns to Ben, who clears his throat.

BEN

And if I did, I think I should not communicate it to you. Marriage is the proper remedy. It is the most natural state of man, and therefore the state in which you are most likely to find solid happiness.

Your reasons against entering into it at present appear to me not well founded. You cite circumstantial advantages by postponing marriage. These seem not only uncertain, but small in comparison with that of the thing itself, that of being married and settled.

JANE

See, first he gives a little marriage pep talk before he gets to the good stuff.

BEN

It is the man and woman united that make the complete human being! Separate, she wants his force of body and strength of reason; he, her softness, sensibility, and acute discernment. Together they are more likely to succeed in the world. A single man has not nearly the value he would have in the state of union. He is an incomplete animal. He resembles the odd half of a pair of scissors.

If you get a prudent, healthy wife, your industry in your profession, with her good economy, will be a fortune sufficient.

But...

JANE

(Excited still:) This is the good part.

BEN

If you will not take the counsel and persist in thinking of a commerce with the sex inevitable, then I repeat my former advice, that in all your amours you should prefer old women to young ones.

JANE

Isn't that hysterical!

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Well... Yes--

JANE

Wait, it gets even better.

BEN

You call this a paradox and demand my reasons. They are these:

Because older women have more knowledge of the world, and their minds are better stored with observations, their conversation is more improving and more lastingly agreeable.

To the audience:

BEN

Do not hold back your applause, dear audience.

The audience applauds.

BEN

Because when women cease to be handsome they study to be good. To maintain their influence over men, they supply the diminution of beauty by an augmentation of utility. They learn to do a thousand services small and great, and are the most tender and useful of friends when you are sick. Thus they continue amiable and hence there is hardly such a thing to be found as an old woman who is not a good woman.

Again Ben motions to the audience to applaud; the audience obliges.

BEN (CONT'D)

Because there is no hazard of children, which irregularly produced may be attended with much inconvenience. (*Under his breath:*) Don't I know it.

Because through more experience older women are more prudent and discreet in conducting an intrigue to prevent suspicion. The commerce with them is therefore safer with regard to your reputation. And with regard to theirs, if the affair should happen to be known, considerate people might be rather inclined to excuse an old woman, who would kindly take care of a young man, form his manners by her good counsels, and prevent his ruining his health and fortune among mercenary prostitutes.

Because in every animal that walks upright the deficiency of the fluids that fill the muscles appears first in the highest part. The face first grows lank and wrinkled; then the neck; then the breast and arms; the lower parts continuing to the last as plump as ever: so that covering all above with a basket--

Spotlight returns to Jane.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

Ohmygod! Is he saying to put a basket over the old woman's head?

JANE

No, no. He wouldn't say that. I'd probably make him change that!

MRS. FERNANDEZ

(Uncertainly:) A wise move, I'm sure.

Spotlight returns to Ben.

BEN

...And, as in the dark all cats are gray, the pleasure of corporal enjoyment with an old woman is at least equal, and frequently superior; every knack being, by practice, capable of improvement.

Ben again motions for applause.

And because the sin is less. The debauching a virgin may be her ruin, and make for her life unhappy.

Therefore, the compunction is less. The having made a young girl miserable may give you frequent bitter reflection; none of which attend the making an old woman happy.

And lastly. Older women are so grateful!!

Ben bows as spotlight returns to an amused and chuckling Jane and a still confused and uncertain Mrs. Fernandez.

JANE

Ben is such a character!

MRS. FERNANDEZ

How, how interesting! You creative types! Where do you get your ideas?

JANE

I don't know.

Jane looks to where Ben is standing.

JANE

They just kind of present themselves.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

An amazing process! I'm sure your play will be... interesting.

JANE

Oh, well, it's not really a play yet. It's more like an idea. Actually, it's probably only a germ of an idea.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

You're working on it. I tell my students to enjoy the journey.

JANE

Enjoy. The. Journey. I never think of that. I'm too preoccupied, really, to enjoy anything.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

I can see that! So. Let's get started, shall we? About James...

Mrs. Fernandez freezes; we now hear only Ben and Jane.

JANE

What about that, Ben? Do you like the idea? A play about the ladies you loved?

BEN

Let's call them affairs of the heart, shall we?

JANE

Sure. Whatever. (*Warming up to the subject:*) You did so love women!

BEN

An understatement. The truth is women weren't just the spice of my life, they were the rhyme and reason for my existence. Still, a whole play about the ladies I loved... I am unsure that particular idea would work.

JANE

I think it would work. Though, you know Ben, no one knows the truth, if you had all these affairs or if they were just innocent flirtations.

BEN

My dear lady, what possible difference can it make?

JANE

People want to know; it matters to them.

BEN

(*Shakes head:*) If, say, a man conducted affairs and managed to keep the passions, great as they may have been, as they most certainly were, if he managed to keep these treasures a secret from history, then this speaks of both his integrity and virtue. If, however, these affairs and their accompanying details were widely known, then he was a scoundrel and a cad of the lowest sort...

JANE

But what if this man was in fact faithful to his rather dull and shrewish wife?

BEN

In that case, obviously, he was a man with no opportunities.

JANE

(Laughs:) You are a scoundrel!

BEN

But... wait. My dear lady, how did you know Deborah was shrewish?

JANE

That word is generally believed to characterize your wife, Ben. At least according to your biographies.

BEN

It's true, I'm afraid. Though in fact, women of that character have generally sound and healthy constitutions, produce a vigorous offspring, are specially good housewives and very careful of their husband's interest.

JANE

But, was it difficult being married to such a wife?

BEN

(Sigh:) As to the noise attending a shrewish wife, tis but a trifle when a man is used to it. You can bare your own faults, so why not a fault in your wife?

Still, it is why I always tell young men, Keep your eyes wide open before marriage and half shut afterwards.

JANE

I bet it is also why you kept an ocean between you and Deborah most of your life.

Jane chuckles, just as Mrs. Fernandez comes abruptly to life.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

You don't find that amusing, do you?

JANE

(Horrorified, confused:) No, of course not. I was, ah, just clearing my throat.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

You do see the problem?

Mrs. Fernandez freezes again.

JANE

Um... Ben, Ben! I have no idea what she's talking about!

BEN
Deflect, dear lady. Deflect.

Jane squirms in a too long pause.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Mrs. Roth?

JANE
Yes, yes. Of course I see the problem.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
And?

BEN
(*Loud whisper:*) Ask for advice.

JANE
I don't know. Exactly. What do you think?

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Well, I think...

Mrs. Fernandez freezes again and Ben and Jane laugh triumphantly.

JANE
It worked!

BEN
Well, done!

JANE
That was close. Anyway, Ben why don't you like my idea?

Jane suddenly notices Mrs. Fernandez again.

JANE
Oh. My. God. I forgot to listen! What is she saying now?

BEN
Tell her you'll think about it. Her advice.

JANE
I'll certainly consider that, Mrs. Fernandez.

MRS. FERNANDEZ
Good. I really think it's for the best.

BEN
Tell her you're inclined to agree.

JANE

I'm inclined to agree.

Mrs. Fernandez stands, signaling an end to the meeting.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

I thought you would. Talk it over with your husband and let us know by Monday, will you?

JANE

Of course.

They both rise, signaling an end to the conference.

JANE

It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Fernandez.

MRS. FERNANDEZ

And good luck with Mr. Franklin!

Curtain closes.

Curtain opens on a lovely garden setting. Jane, dressed for a wedding, sits on a bench and calls out to the distance:

JANE

Be good, James! Your first wedding, Em! I know it is exciting! We still have almost a half hour. I'll be right there. Save me a seat!

Ben appears from behind a bush.

JANE

Ben! I was just thinking about you.

BEN

Making progress, are we?

JANE

I am! I'm so excited. This romance idea could really work. I'm reading this wonderful book on your wild and crazy love life! It offers up an embarrassment of riches, though...

Jane notices an empty rocking chair in the garden.

BEN

Yes? Though?

JANE

Do you see that rocking chair, Ben?

Ben follows Jane's gaze.

BEN

Can't say that I do, dear lady. I'm sure it has nothing to do with me.

JANE

Sometimes when I see it, I start to make out an old black woman, sitting there, smiling at me.

BEN

How very peculiar!

Jane shakes her head as if to rid herself of the sight.

JANE

Anyway, I'm reading your love letters--

BEN

Oh that. I didn't keep all of them, you know. In fact I burned most of them.

JANE

I know, I know. You destroyed all of Catherine Ray's letters--

BEN

Katy?

JANE

(Nods:) We only have some of your letters to her. But it is enough to feel the passion between you two. Imagine this: Young Catherine Ray walks on stage, her beauty so great that the collective breath is swept from the audience. This is a lady you fell in love with the moment you met--

BEN

Heavens no! It wasn't like that at all. Katy was beautiful, for sure, but I didn't fall in love until the moment, well, it was the moment I heard the music of her laughter.

JANE

From across a crowded room?

BEN

(Nods:) At my brother John's house. She was visiting a sister who was married to my brother's stepson.

(Dreamily:) Before we were even introduced, she flew across the room, "Is this the celebrated Dr. Franklin?" A exchange of gratuitous greetings followed and then, she noticed my bifocals. She reached across the distance, gently stole them from my face and placed them over her eyes. That's when I first heard the sound of her laughter.

JANE

I see her so clearly!

BEN

The next time I saw her, she was sitting by the fire in the circle of her skirts, her laughter singing into the room. There was mischief in the sound and color on her cheeks. The source? The book in her hands, a recent gift from her older sister, *Every Christian Wife's Duty*.

JANE

(Laughs:) And was she worried about facing these challenges?

BEN

(Chuckles:) She most certainly was not! She was wondering if the strain and difficulty of these duties might be lessened with an older, experienced tutor...

Ben smiles as he remembers this.

JANE

Wow, Ben. You really loved her, didn't you?

Jane withdraws an impossible large book from a small purse and flips open the pages.

JANE

Let's see, this says you spent a week with her, and then you accompanied her on her travels to a sister's house. Isaacson's biography only said on the way your poorly shod horses had trouble on the icy hills; they got caught in cold rains and kept taking wrong turns. How long was this trip?

BEN

Not long enough, not nearly long enough.

JANE

Then you both stayed at her sister's house, and you even stayed to see her off to her home on Block Island. You wrote: I stood on shore and looked after you, until I could no longer distinguish you, even with my glass.

That's just the beginning. Last night I dug in; I read these love letters. My god, they are so over the top. Perfect for theater!

BEN

Over the top? What can you mean?

JANE

I'll show you. Here, you be Ben Franklin.

BEN

That's easy enough.

JANE

I'll be your Katy.

JANE/KATY

Tell me you love me one thousandth part so well as I do you...

Then you say:

BEN

I know what I said!

Ben clears his throat.

Since you send me kisses on the Northwest wind, tis the gayest wind that blows and gives me the best of spirits. I write this during a storm of snow, the greatest we have had this winter. Your favor comes with snowy fleeces which are as white as your lovely bosom...

Jane collapses with laughter as Pacabel's cannon sounds in the distance; she doesn't notice.

JANE

This is such great stuff! And it just gets better and better. For instance your next romance, or should I say romances?

BEN

I am afraid to inquire as to what you are referring?

JANE

When you moved to England, you lived with a lovely older woman Margaret Stevenson.

BEN

Dear, dear old Maggie. My wife away from home.

JANE

You admit it!

BEN

Why ever not? That good woman kept my house, cooked my meals, entertained my guests, she... *(pause.)* Suffice to say, we fitted together like a pair of old slippers.

JANE

In fact you seemed so cozy and comfortable with Margaret in that role, friends wrote your wife back home, urging her to come at once to England to save her marriage.

Ben dismisses this as nonsense.

BEN

Rabble rousing, trouble making do gooders! Let's leave this ah, friend's letters to Deborah out of it, shall we?

JANE

Especially since it appears you really loved Mary, her daughter.

BEN

I called her Polly. *(To audience:)*
Yes, my dear, sweet Polly, a beautiful young woman who was as enchanting as sunshine on crystal. My affection for Polly ran deep and knew no bounds.

JANE

You wrote more letters to her than anyone! Like Katy, she too, was dear to you your whole life long. In fact you finally convinced Polly to move to America. She was there at your side some forty years later when you died.

You obviously loved each other deeply, though you were also her mentor, feeding her rapacious curiosity countless books and lessons on science.

BEN

Polly had a great intellect! Like a sponge, she was, thirsty for knowledge on every subject from prehistorical ship building to obscure philosophical texts.

JANE

In so many of your letters, there were countless gems. Small literary treasures.

BEN

(Perplexed:) Small?

JANE

Like the advice that saved Polly's life.

BEN

Whatever do you mean?

JANE

The advice you wrote in a letter to Polly after her husband died and she was forced to move into the home of her difficult and cantankerous old aunt.

BEN

Oh that!

JANE

It should be required reading for all care takers of, well, difficult old folks.

BEN

Polly's aunt's temper was never the best, and, unfortunately, when such is the case with people, age seldom mends it.

JANE

Crouchy old men is not just a cliché; they are a reality!

BEN

Indeed. Since wrong turns of the mind by time are almost as little in our power to cure as those of the body, it seemed the only answer to Polly's trouble was compassion.

JANE

So true! You urged Polly to return and (*Reads from book:*) to invent amusements for the old woman, to be pleased when she accepted them and patient when she peevishly rejected them. You claimed that nothing is more apt to sour the temper of aged people than the apprehension that they are neglected and they are extremely apt to entertain such suspicions. Your last words were that proper action will be rewarded.

BEN

(*Laughs:*) The old lady left her a fortune!

JANE

And this was around the time you maintained a relationship with Lady Caroline, right?

BEN

Caroline. A strikingly beautiful woman, dear sister to Admiral Howe and General Howe, the men who eventually lead the forces against us during the war. Still, at the time Caroline's brothers were very much on our side, you see. In fact they used our relationship to assess the possibility of reaching an negotiated truce and preventing war--

JANE

OMG. That's it. It's brilliant! You and Lady Caroline have a passionate romance with the fate of the known world set before you. It will be tragic--

BEN

But our affair was not tragic!

JANE

Yes, yes it was. I see it now! Ben Franklin and Lady Caroline Howe. A tragic love story set against the sweeping tides of Revolutionary history. Like... like the Titanic!

BEN

Who is this Titanic fellow?

Jane is distracted.

JANE

Hum? Oh, it was a ship. A giant passenger ship that hit an iceberg and sunk, killing most of the passengers.

Jane isn't listening...

BEN

Oh? That is tragic. You wouldn't be familiar with the ship's hull design, would you?

JANE

I don't even know what a hull is, really. But, Ben you played chess with Lady Caroline, didn't you?

BEN

I played chess with quite a few women.

JANE

Not on a great lawn in front of an audience with the Lady's servants as the chess pieces! All to win her favors!

BEN

Did I?

JANE

OHOHOH! I can see it now. Your playing this fantastic game of chess with Lady Caroline, only your playing for a negotiated peace, the winner gaining concessions from the loser. It would be a brilliant scene, the fate of the colonies resting on the outrageous flirtations transpiring beneath the guise of a fabulous chess game!

BEN

That ah, might be a slight exaggeration.

JANE

But visually stunning, nonetheless. If only we can set it up on stage. *(Pauses...)* Ha! It can be funny, too. Say, you put her king into prize, and she says, we do not take kings so and then you say--

BEN

We do in America!

JANE

Or, even better: Say you are losing the game-

BEN

Seems far-fetched, unlikely.

JANE

And you snatch the king and put him in your pocket, yet continue to play. She says, Oh Ben, should I continue playing? And you say--

BEN

Yes, continue, dear lady and we shall soon see that the party without a king will win the game!

Jane laughs.

JANE

This is writing itself. *(Pause:)* Of course the light of Caroline's romance might very well outshine your others. We'll just need other visually stunning scenes. I know! I know. Weren't you always playing chess in the bathtub with various ladies?

BEN

Chess in the bathtub?

JANE

(Snaps fingers:) Didn't that movie about John Adams have him walking in on you in the bathtub with a lady?

BEN

Poor Mister Adams. *(Laughing:)* I'm afraid it was my destiny to constantly be shocking his somewhat prim sensibilities. But wait, I'm confused. What is a movie and why would anyone make one about John Adams?

JANE

(Laughs:) Oh Ben, believe me, you were still the star in John Adam's story. I wasn't the only one who lost interest as soon as you died.

BEN

I died?!

Jane casts him a look of alarm mixed with no small amount of confusion.

BEN

I'm teasing you, dear. Are movies some kind of history telling?

JANE

It can be. Movies tell stories. Actually they're one of a million by-products of your electricity experiments.

BEN

Are they?

JANE

Eventually we found a way to tell stories through images and sound that are transmitted via electricity.

BEN

Fascinating! I should welcome the opportunity to see one of these movies.

JANE

I would love to show you Ben, but let's get real. It's probably not in the realm of the possible in any meaningful way.

BEN

I grasp your point.

JANE

You always get me, Ben. (*She rubs hands together:*) So far this play, about all the women you loved, especially this Lady Caroline, could be so great. We haven't even got to your French ladies! What were their names?

Jane flips through the pages of her book.

There was Madame Anne-Louise d'Hardancourt Brillion and her children and then the infamous Madame Helvetius. You even asked Madame Helvetius to marry you, didn't you?

BEN

The lady refused me.

JANE

But she loved you?

BEN

Oh indeed. She just didn't want to ruin our ah, physical relationship with the bonds of matrimony.

Jane's delight quiets after a moment.

JANE

So, let's see. Have we got all of them, Ben, all the women you loved?

BEN

I don't know. I loved quite a few women and of course, I didn't ah, love all of them, you know.

JANE

I know, I know. You were kind of outrageous for your time, Ben. For anytime really. The famous artist Charles Wilson Peace called on you at Craven Street and found you with a young lady on your lap in *amorous reciprocation*. We still have the drawing of it, but no one knows who the lady is? Polly? Lady Caroline?

BEN

A lady, sitting on my lap? Could be anyone, I suppose.

JANE

Anyone? Really? Some scholars even think you were a member of the Hell Fire club--

BEN

A member? Heavens no. Though I occasionally found myself in attendance at that particular gentleman's club.

JANE

What went on there?

BEN

Rather too much debauchery, I dare say.

JANE

You're smiling!

BEN

Happy memories.

JANE

Debauchery. That reminds me of something I read in Issacson's biography.

BEN

What?

JANE

Your investigation of the famous Viennese doctor Anton Mesmer.

BEN

Dr. Mesmer! That flamboyant fraud!

JANE

The King suspected him of such and he appointed you and Dr. Gullotin to investigate.

BEN

The nut case created some cockamamy theory that maladies are caused by some unseen universal fluid emitted by heavenly bodies or some such. It was obviously ridiculous, if people gave it but a moment's consideration. However, I have noticed, as I am sure you have, dear lady, there is a wonderful deal of credulity in the world, and deceptions as absurd have supported themselves for ages. Mesmerism soon became all the rage.

JANE

Until you wrote your report. Your experiment was brilliant, Ben, even by modern standards. You blind folded his patients, so that no one knew who was treated and who wasn't and surprise, everyone got better, whether they had been magnetized or not. What was at work here, you concluded, was the power of the imagination.

BEN

(Nodding:) Indeed. Just so.

JANE

What I found interesting was the unpublished annex to the report, *(reads from book:)* where you noted that the treatment was powerful at sexually stimulating young women when "titillations delicieuses" were applied.

BEN

(Laughing; rocking back on his heels:) Mesmerism somehow managed to separate young ladies from their natural inhibitions. Who would have guessed?

JANE

(With sarcasm:) Not me. It would have taken me years to figure that out.

HUSBAND VO

Jane, honey, it's time. They're about to start.

JANE

Oh! I'll be right there! *(To Ben:)* I have to go, but I think it would probably be best to leave the debauchery aspect of your ah, adventurous love life out of our play. It doesn't quite fit in with all of your romances.

BEN

Of course! I'd have it no other way.

JANE

Oh, but before I forget, something we absolutely must include is--

BEN

At this point, I'm afraid to hear about it.

JANE

Don't be silly. I mean, on the subject of the women in your life, well, Polly Stevenson wasn't the only Polly, was she? We just have to include Polly Baker, too.

BEN

The infamously more famous Polly! My God, that woman followed me my whole life!

JANE

I know! I know! That poor woman's speech appeared in every newspaper not just in our country, but around the world. It had the awesome power of changing laws! In England, America, France. That's it, somehow Polly Baker will be one of your women.

BEN

But--

JANE

She'll have to appear on stage to read her famous essay.

BEN

But my dear lady, she cannot appear on stage.

JANE

Why not? You had no objections to Silence Dogooder?

BEN

But Mrs. Dogooder did not have five illegitimate children?

JANE

Even funnier! Oh, I can just see it!

Polly Baker, a poor colonel woman, appears on the stage to the right. She lights up upon spotting Ben.

POLLY

Why aye, have my eyes found the good Dr. Franklin?

BEN

Polly Baker?

POLLY

A soul would swear you at least would recognize me.

BEN

But you look uncannily similar to Silence Dogooder!

POLLY

Coincidence or something else?

JANE

Oh, this could be so good.

Jane rubs her hands together, a gesture of excitement.

JANE

First, we'll set the speech up. The audience needs to know that it is customary for judges to fine or even imprisoned women for having children out of wed lock. And you were one of these women, punished for having illegitimate children--

POLLY

You mean bastards. Five of 'em.

JANE

Was it five?

POLLY

(With certainty:) Believe me, it was five.

JANE

Okay, let's see how this goes. I'm imagining this. Say your speech, Polly, just as you did before the judges who were about to sentence you.

Spotlight comes to Polly as she curtsies.

POLLY

May it please the honourable bench to indulge me a few words: I am a poor unhappy woman; who have no money to pay lawyers to plead for me, being hard put to get a tolerable living. I shall not trouble your honours with a long speech; for I have not the presumption to expect that you may be prevailed on to deviate in your sentence from the law in my favour. All I humbly hope is, that your honours would charitably move the Governor's goodness on my behalf, that my fine may be remitted.

JANE

At the very least.

Polly shoots Jane a look full of irritation. Jane grimaces in response to having spoken out of turn.

POLLY

This is the fifth time, gentlemen, that I have been dragg'd before your courts on the same account; twice I have paid heavy fines, and twice have been brought to public punishment for want of money to pay those fines. This may have been agreeable to the laws; I do not dispute it: But since laws are sometimes unreasonable in themselves, and therefore repealed; I take the liberty to say that this law is both unreasonable in itself, and particularly severe with regard to me, who have always lived an inoffensive life in the neighbourhood where I was born, and defy my enemies (if I have any) to say I ever wrong'd man, woman, or child.

So abstracted from the law, I cannot conceive (may it please your Honours) what the nature of my offence is. I have brought five fine children into the world, at the risk of my life: I have maintained them well by my own industry without burdening the township, and could have done it better, if it had not been for the heavy charges and fines I have paid.

Can it be a crime to add to the number of the God's subjects, in a new country that really wants people? I own I should think it a praise worthy, rather than a punishable action.

I have debauch'd no other woman's husband, nor enticed any innocent youth: all I have done is have children without being married. But, can even this be a fault of mine?

JANE

I don't know. We might have to cut this. It might be too long, too boring. Maybe we can shorten her speech a bit.

Polly shoots Jane a startled look.

POLLY

Good heavens, are you serious, woman? You and Dr. Franklin have been up here blabbering for over an hour, you marveling at this man's every small and large utterance, and finally, when I appear for naught more than two minutes, to give my pivotal and highly regarded speech, you suddenly worry that I'm boring people?

BEN

It is about sexual mores, and well, I have often notice that few people find the subject uninteresting.

JANE

Oh, well. Go on then.

POLLY

Now where was I? All these brats runnin' under foot, the money worries, and these dim-witted comments from the pit, it addles my brain.

JANE

(Looks at book:) I don't think that's in the speech, is it?

POLLY

Oh, yes, I remember.

Polly clears her throat.

I appeal to your Honours. You are pleased to allow I don't want sense; but I must be stupid to the last degree, not to prefer the honourable state of wedlock, to the condition I have lived in.

I always was, and still am, willing to enter into it; I doubt not my behaving well in it, having all the industry, frugality, fertility, and skill in economy, appertaining to a good wife's character. I defy any person to say I ever refused an offer of that sort: On the contrary, I readily consented to the only proposal of marriage that ever was made me, which was when I was a virgin; but too easily confiding in the person's sincerity that made it, I unhappily lost my own honour, by trusting to his; for he got me with child, and then forsook me. That very person you all know; he is now become a Magistrate of this County.

JANE

Wait a minute. I'm lost. What person?

POLLY

The one who stole my virginity!

JANE`

Oh. But why didn't he marry you?

Ben rocks back on his heels.

BEN

Why buy the cow when you can have the milk?

JANE

You never said that, Ben.

BEN

I would have, had I thought of it.

JANE

No, you wouldn't!

BEN

Quite right. I would have said, if, say, I were Polly--

POLLY

Why buy the whole pig when all you want is a little sausage?

Ben and Polly laugh uproariously.

JANE

I don't think this is working.

POLLY

Nonsense. The people love it. Dr. Franklin, where did you find this woman? She is missin' all our fun.

JANE

Fine, fine. I was just imagining a little coherency, that's all.

POLLY

Now where was I again?

BEN

You're chasing pigs in a quest for a little sausage.

POLLY

Exactly. I had hopes the main pig, the first I'd ever know, this magistrate fellow I mentioned, would have appeared this day on the bench, and have endeavoured to moderate the court in my favour; then I should have scorn'd to have mention'd it; but I must complain of it as unjust and unequal, that my betrayer and undoer, the first cause of all my faults and miscarriages (if they must be deemed such) should be advanced to honour and power, in the same government that punishes my misfortunes with infamy.

JANE

A modern audience will be so sympathetic to this part. Just listening to it fills me with indignation!

POLLY

Not indignation. More like rage. I was a butcher set in search of all these pigs.

JANE

It is so unfair, really, but go on. This part is quite good.

POLLY

It be even better if you stopped interruptin' me.

JANE

Of course. Mums the word.

POLLY

Everyone says the precepts of religion are violated by my transgressions. If mine is a religious offence, then leave it, Gentlemen, to religious punishments. You have already excluded me from all the comforts of your church communion: Is not that sufficient?

You believe I have offended heaven, and must suffer eternal fire: Will not that be sufficient? What need is there of your additional fines and whippings?

If I thought what you call a sin was really such, I would not presumptuously commit it. But how can it be believed that heaven is angry at my having children, when, to the little done by me towards it, God has been pleased to add his divine skill and admirable workmanship in the formation of their bodies, and crown'd it by furnishing them with rational and immortal souls?

Forgive me Gentlemen, if I talk a little extravagantly on these matters; I am no devine. But if you, great men, must be making laws, do not turn natural and useful actions into crimes by your prohibitions.

JANE

Now, you're just sucking up, Polly.

POLLY

Sucking. Up? What be the meanin' of these words, if you aren't a babe in arms?

BEN

She flatters the judges vanities in order to assure a better out come, which, I dare say, is an excellent strategy.

JANE

I suppose so. Very well. Go on.

POLLY

Instead reflect a little on the horrid consequences of this law in particular: what numbers of procur'd abortions! How many distress'd mothers have been driven by the terror of punishment and public shame, to imbrue, contrary to nature, their own trembling hands in the blood of their helpless offspring!

JANE

Abortions? Did they have abortions back then?

POLLY

A right lot of them.

JANE

But how?

POLLY

Two paths to the same sad end: surgical or Penny Royal, a herb. Though a good many folks are against the procedures.

JANE

I have always felt the very essence of the objections against abortion--the whole stealing a human life thing--is but a rationalization for a puritanical discomfort with women's sexual freedom.

Polly glares at Jane.

POLLY

But who asked you, miss?

JANE

Well, no one, really, I mean we're on the subject and--

POLLY

Do you mind?

JANE

Sorry.

Polly rolls her eyes, sighs.

POLLY

Do let me continue. 'Tis the law itself that is guilty of all these barbarities. Repeal it then, gentlemen; let it be expung'd for ever from your books.

And on the other hand, take into your wise consideration the great and growing number of bachelors in the country, many of whom, from the mean fear of the expense of a family, have never sincerely and honourably courted a woman in their lives. Is not theirs a greater offence against the public good, than mine? Compel them then, by a law, either to marry, or pay double the fine of fornication every year.

JANE

You go, girl.

Polly shoots Jane a harsh look; Jane covers her mouth, as if with contrition.

POLLY

What must poor young women do, whom custom has forbid to solicit the men, and who cannot force themselves upon husbands, when the laws take no care to provide them any, and yet severely punish if they do their duty without them? Yes, Gentlemen, I venture to call it a duty; 'tis the duty of the first and great command of nature, and of God: increase and multiply.

A duty, from the steady performance of which nothing has ever been able to deter me;

but for it's sake, I have hazarded the loss of the public esteem, and frequently incurr'd public disgrace and punishment; and therefore ought, in my humble opinion, instead of a whipping, to have a statue erected to my memory.

Polly finally curtsies. Jan and Ben applaud.

The traditional wedding march sounds in the distance.

POLLY

Oh, now, hear that? There's the one song missin' from my life!

JANE

Ohmygod! The wedding's started without me.

POLLY

Story of my life.

Jane's hands come to her cheeks.

JANE

What can I do?

BEN

Run along!

JANE

I can't just barge in once it has started. It's too late.

BEN

If there's nothing to be done, you might as well sit back and relax.

POLLY

Those be the very words that first got me into this ah, pig sty.

JANE

(Distraught:) Emily was counting on me to go over my wedding. In detail. She wanted me to compare and contrast with her father's and my wedding. Then we were going to plan her wedding. The kid is into weddings like a dog's into dinner. I'm like, really hoping it is just a stage. *Jane sinks into her chair.* Oh Ben, I'm always disappointing my kids.

A moment of silent contemplation follows the remark.

POLLY

Do you clothe and fed 'em?

JANE

Yes.

POLLY

Do you give 'em a pat of affection once in a while?

JANE

Oh yes, lot's of love, but--

POLLY

Never mind. The rest doesn't amount to much.

JANE

Really? You think so?

POLLY

I know it... Oh look at that. The doors of the church are thrown open and everyone's piling out, getting ready to throw rice at the newly married couple. There they are now. Very handsome, if I do say so myself. And why look at that man heading toward us with the little girl in toe, the boy runnin' after. Oh dear, is that, why, is that your husband?

JANE

Oh no!

POLLY

I wouldn't want one of those with him wearing' a face full of anger, like that!

JANE

I have to go! And, and, well, we're not really through here, are we? I mean we have to figure out some clever way to tell the audience that you created Polly Baker and wrote the speech just to change the laws! And, and we have to show the audience that for the rest of your life you'd meet people who discussed Polly Baker, never knowing you were her creator--

Ben and Polly have both disappeared.

HUSBAND VO

Jane, we've had it!

Curtain closes.

Curtain opens.

Jane stands with an open book in hand, while Ben sits comfortably on the couch, drinking a scotch.

JANE

You honestly cannot say who you loved most in your life?

BEN

I'm afraid not, dear lady.

JANE

Then we have no ending. Even if I had the shape of the play before me, the rather essential beginning and middle part, which I do not, but if I did, and I started to think of some kind of ending, I'd always be terrified I left something out. *(Hand to head in exasperation.)*

Just the real conclusion to your life, there are so many incidents, events, and stories I'd feel compelled to squeeze in.

BEN

Oh?

JANE

Like when you were sailing back to America for the last time as an old man--I should say a very old man--you decided, as you wrote, to empty your nautical budget once and for all. Issacson summarizes it: *(Reads from book:)* You designed a better hull, more effective sails and booms, you described past experiments and proposed future ones on the effects of air currents on various shapes, you figured out a way to use a pulley that prevents anchor cables from breaking. You analyzed how ships fill with water after a leak. You described the benefits of Eskimo kayaks, Chinese rowboats, Indian canoes, and Pacific Island proas. You proposed new water and air propellers, drew pages and pages of diagrams. You conducted ingenious experiments that maintain their relevance to this day, experiments too numerous to list. In addition you wrote a number of papers filled with experimental findings on other matters, important matters for people's day to day lives. Like how to cure smoky chimneys and build better stoves.

BEN

I suddenly grasp the purpose of yada, yada, yada. My dear lady, do you think the audience really needs to know this?

JANE

It's a small snapshot of your greatness, of the breath of your startling intelligence on one subject. I mean you were an old man, this is but one Atlantic crossing. The great science historian Bernard Cohen wrote that Franklin's scientific achievements placed him in the pantheon with Newton.

Jane looks up, only to find Ben sleeping on the couch.

Ben, wake up.

Ben wakes with a start.

BEN

Are we done yet?

JANE

No.

BEN

Are we close to the end?

JANE

The end. Ben, that's it. Ohmygod. Maybe your end is our beginning!

BEN

Not that again!

JANE

We start at the end as you're dying, surrounded by everyone you love: Your daughter and grandchildren, Katy, Polly, her children and of course the dozens of admirers who visited every day. That's it. That's brilliant! Every visitor to your death bed illuminates some aspect of your life. We can do your romances this way.

(Rubs hands together with excitement.)

And one thing we haven't covered, really, are your religious thoughts.

BEN

My religious thoughts?

JANE

There's so many. Like, like when you said that thing about hypocritical pretenders to religion--

BEN

Oh... I scarcely remember that.

JANE

I know it by heart. Does our civil society suffer more from hypocritical pretenders to religion or by the openly profane? No doubt it is the latter, especially if he holds a post in the government. *(Laughs.)* They're hysterical! We can definitely squeeze them into death bed scenes. And what about when the president of Yale wrote asking you about religion and specifically the divinity of Christ. Where is that?

Jane rushes to the book shelve and withdraws a book, flipping quickly through the pages.

JANE (CONT'D)

Here's what you said: As to Jesus, I think his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, is the best the world ever saw or is likely to see. As to the divinity of Jesus, it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now when I expect to have the opportunity to know the truth soon enough with less trouble.

Jane throws her head back with laughter.

Ben Franklin, through and through. Still, your religious ideas are best characterized by the single word tolerance, wouldn't you say? You were great friends with so many religious leaders, priests and reverends. Though much was made of your friendship with Reverend Whitefield--

BEN

Ole' George? Why would that be?

JANE

Because he was a fundamentalist, your friendship seemed out of character. Until I examined it and then I realize that you made a fortune printing his sermons and books, and while for a period you were regularly seen at his sermons, you found the venue perfect for conducting various experiments on sound and distance. (*Laughs, amused.*)

BEN

The reverend used to regularly pray for my conversion, but... he never did have the satisfaction of believing his prayers had been heard.

JANE

I remember reading that bit about you and this unusual religion, I cannot remember the name, but their ideas excited you. They wouldn't write any of their dogma down, in fear that someone might read it a hundred years later and imagine it was set in stone, that it was some kind of truth, rather than a best guess. Where was that?

Jane searches for another book and finds instead:

Oh. Here's a nice summary of your religious sentiments: Since you could not ascertain the veracity of any one religion or religious idea, you always believed the only thing that could possibly matter to any God was doing good to men.

Your whole life, it seems, was about good deeds and charity.
At your funeral--

BEN

Thank heavens! We have at last reached my funeral...

JANE

No, no. I was just going to point out that all the clergy of Philadelphia was there, for even though you were barely a believer, you had aided all the churches of the city--

BEN

Was my funeral small and somber?

JANE

Are you kidding? Ben, it was the largest funeral in history. Over twenty thousand people showed up. Flags flew at half mask, the house of representatives wore mourning for a month... The senate refused.

Ben and Jane chuckle.

BEN

Quite fitting that bit.

JANE

Van Doren wrote of your death: There were almost as many eulogies as there were orators, almost as many ceremonies as societies and of course charming women around the world wept. My favorite, everyone's favorite, the one that summed you up in the fewest words was Wiloby's. He said: I met the man so great he held lightning in one hand and the scepter of the King of England in the other.

BEN

Oh my. That is rather... grand.

JANE

Wets my eyes with tears each time I read it!

(Silent pause as Jane begins to sense this is indeed the end.)

BEN

Tell me, did they use it?

JANE

Use what?

BEN

The epitaph I wrote for myself.

Jane slowly nods...

BEN

The body of B. Franklin, Printer; (Like the cover of an old book, Its contents worn out, and stripped of its lettering and gilding) Lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost: For it will, (as he believed) appear once more, In a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected...

Jane finishes.

JANE

By the author...

A long moment of silence.

Ben, Ben. I'm scared. I don't even know how we got to this place? One minute we're talking about your great romances and religious ideas and then we find ourselves at your funeral and now, now that epitaph. It's, it's like we're at the end.

Quietly:

BEN

It is the end.

JANE

But I haven't even got the beginning or the middle, yet alone the end? There's so much more to cover! Every time I open a book on you, I am reading a wonderful tale--

Ben shakes his head.

JANE

Oh my God. It is the end...

Jane hugs Ben.

JANE (CONT'D)

But I can't let you go. Not now. Not yet.

BEN

It's time, dear lady. It's time.

JANE

I'll miss you so much.

BEN

No doubt someone else will come along.

JANE

I love you, Ben Franklin.

*Jane finds herself alone on stage.
Upset, weeping softly, she falls on the
couch.*

JANE

Ben, Ben. You're gone. It's over. This whole play idea is finished. The weight of my sadness; it's unbearable. I can't breathe. I've got to pull myself together. For my kids. That's it. I'll pay more attention to my kids. And John. I'll really be there now.

*Dazed, she stands up, looking around.
She wipes her face, trying to pull
herself together.*

I'll start by cleaning up a little.

*Jane slowly goes about straightening
things out. She finally seizes the
silhouette of an old woman in a rocking
chair.*

JANE

Who are you? Why, oh my God, are you Harriet? Harriet Tubman? This is so strange! Just last month I was reading a children's biography about you to my son and I was thinking, what a remarkable person--

HARRIET TUBMAN VO

Come sit a spell, young lady. I got a story to tell.

Curtain closes...

