

Life Science

A Play in Two Acts

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(revised, 2014)

Characters

Ben Brighton	39, TV weatherman, holding on to the silver lining
Phoebe Brighton	15, cheerleader with a flair for poetry
Janis Brighton	39, teacher fighting creation science and family anxiety
Paul Sturdivant	17, Phoebe's boyfriend, serious about school and eternity
Roy Sturdivant	36, preacher and Moral Majority supporter
Victor Akins	16, popular basketball player and Janis' science monitor
Reverend Ezekiel Akins	45, United Methodist pastor working for the bishop

Time

December, 1981

Place

Little Rock, Arkansas, including homes, the federal courthouse, a TV station, church and an emergency room. All seem spare against the sky.

“Knowledge about life is one thing; effective occupation of a place in life, with its dynamic currents passing through your being, is another.”

~William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience

Act I, scene 1

(December, 1981, Sunday night. Ben stands near a weather visual at the opening of the ten o'clock news.)

BEN

Good evening, Arkansas! And welcome, visitors, to the Land of Opportunity! Hope you Californians packed enough sweaters. Folks from the chilly cities probably feel it's balmy! We're worn out with winter already, but weather doesn't faze you science and Bible experts who've blown into town. If I predicted a new Ice Age, maybe—but: no glaciers in sight. I'll just tell you how much longer to pile on the quilts and keep snow boots by the door. Stay tuned for your forecast details.

(Janis enters living room from kitchen, Off.)

BEN (Cont'd)

Now back to Dave with tonight's top stories.

(Janis turns off Ben's broadcast and sits, resuming work on lesson plans from various stacks of paper. Phoebe enters with a rumpled gift box, bow askew.)

PHOEBE

This was in the trash?

JANIS

Right.

(Phoebe opens it and pulls out a stuffed monkey.)

PHOEBE

Cuddly.

(Finding a note.)

“Luck from the jungle!” Here. From Daddy.

JANIS

It's a stale joke, hon.

PHOEBE

I need a good luck charm.

JANIS

Take it. Why are you wearing Ben's old letter jacket?

PHOEBE

Going outside to wait for Paul.

JANIS

Oh, hell. I don't want to move all this. If I'd known he was coming—

PHOEBE

(Grabbing an afghan throw from the sofa.)

We'll keep warm.

(Phoebe exits to the porch. Janis organizes papers. Paul enters.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

Hurry, Paul, I'm freezing to death!

PAUL

Got here just in time: your lips aren't blue, yet.

(They kiss.)

PHOEBE

Much better. But we're stuck under the icy stars.

PAUL

Why?

PHOEBE

Mom, with school papers and a bad mood spread all over the place.

PAUL

What's that little thing?

PHOEBE

Benji. Daddy's gift to her. Which she dumped.

PAUL

I don't blame her.

PHOEBE

I saved those sweet eyes! Hold me until the stupid trial ends.

PAUL

Don't worry. We started a prayer chain tonight.

PHOEBE

Against Mom?

PAUL

It's not personal—like our prayers when she was sick. The Lord'll give the judge wisdom, he'll

PAUL (Cont'd)

rule for creation science, and teachers make new lesson plans. No big deal.

PHOEBE

Unless a teacher dies fighting it.

PAUL

Phoebe, don't confuse issues. Aren't you glad she has the energy to stand up for what she believes?

PHOEBE

It's like her mind disappeared with the tumor. What if she divorces Daddy?

PAUL

Whatever happens, we'll stick together.

PHOEBE

You'll be at college, somewhere.

PAUL

If I get into Liberty, I'll write every day. I'll see lots more snow—and real mountains.

PHOEBE

I like it here.

PAUL

When you get there, you'll like real winter, too.

PHOEBE

So far off.

(Inside, kitchen phone rings. Janis exits to answer it.)

PAUL

Not for me. Time to hit the books.

PHOEBE

After five damn minutes?

PAUL

Hey, don't cuss. I want us to be together forever.

PHOEBE

I miss you now.

PAUL

Love is patient—at least until finals are over.

(She pinches his leg.)

PAUL (Cont'd)

Ow!

PHOEBE

(Massaging his leg.)

Don't make me hang out by myself.

PAUL

Prayer helps.

PHOEBE

You keep saying that.

PAUL

Well?

(Pause.)

PAUL (Cont'd)

Heavenly Father, Phoebe and I thank you for bringing us together. Tonight, and whenever we're apart, give us strength. Comfort Phoebe. Give her hope, and lift her up by Your love, my love and her parents' love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

(He clears his throat.)

PHOEBE

Amen. Sweet.

PAUL

See? The Lord's with us.

PHOEBE

I meant you—thinking about me that way. Honestly, I don't feel God.

PAUL

You're impossible!

PHOEBE

Paul, stay, and then call and talk to me after curfew—like you used to.

(He kisses her.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

Was that you, or God?

PAUL

Sshhh. I promise: this weekend we'll celebrate the end of my SATs.

PHOEBE

Finally! And my speech trophy.

PAUL

You can do it. What's the new poem?

PHOEBE

No switch.

PAUL

A girl's voice just isn't right for "The Creation."

PHOEBE

They loved it in speech class.

PAUL

How can you sound forceful enough?

PHOEBE

I'm getting stronger. The lines are so beautiful.

(Reciting.)

Darkness covered everything.

Blacker than a hundred midnights—

Haven't you felt like that?

PAUL

It's about God's power, Phoebe, not our feelings. You want to embarrass your mom?

PHOEBE

No! She doesn't care what poem I do.

PAUL

I doubt it. You should find a different poem.

PHOEBE

You mean start all over.

PAUL

I'm behind you a hundred percent.

PHOEBE

Then if it snows tomorrow, come back for at least a hot chocolate break. I'll look at other poems.

PAUL

That's possible. Benji, keep her company 'til then.

(They kiss.)

PHOEBE

Sweet dreams.

PAUL

You, too. 'Bye!

(He exits. She enters the house, turns on television, and Ben appears by a forecast visual, wrapping up the 10 o'clock weather report. She sits to watch.)

BEN

Tonight's low: twenty-eight degrees, not too unusual for early December in central Arkansas. We could see a few snowflakes, but no accumulation. Roads won't be a problem, but watch for icy patches on the bridges. I know, you kiddos crossed fingers for a 'snow day.' Well, wish, pray, or complain—our forecast predicts this high pressure will hold back moisture from the Gulf.

PHOEBE

Shit.

BEN

But, since Arkansas weather changes as fast as you can say "twister," tune in early to see if a wintry mix causes any closings. Meanwhile, students, turn frowns upside down! Take a cool joke to school: "What do you get when you cross the Abominable Snowman with Dracula?"

BEN (Cont'd) and PHOEBE

Frostbite!

BEN (Cont'd)

Get a little extra credit from your science teacher for that one.

PHOEBE

Not in a million years.

(Janis enters with coffee cup.)

BEN

Now, let's bring up the colorscan radar, and. . . .

(Janis turns off television. Ben exits.)

That's Daddy!

PHOEBE

Tune in tomorrow. Where's Paul?

JANIS

Studying, of course.

PHOEBE

What about your homework?

JANIS

Stupid science is done.

PHOEBE

Good. What chapter are you on?

JANIS

I've got to practice for speech tournament.

PHOEBE

When's that?

JANIS

Saturday. I'm doing the "The Creation."

PHOEBE

You know tons of poems.

JANIS

I picked it for Paul, to kind of get closer to the Bible.

PHOEBE

No coincidence that the trial begins tomorrow and his dad supports creation science?

JANIS

It's a great poem—saying it makes me feel like a huge heart beating with love.

PHOEBE

Phoebe, testifying protects my job.

JANIS

Now, Paul says I shouldn't do it, because I can't sound like God. You do your thing—I'll try to do mine. We're both under pressure.

PHOEBE

JANIS

For just two more weeks. Then we'll have a Merry Christmas and damned Happier New Year.

PHOEBE

Because Daddy comes home? He's a great coach for poetry interpretation.

JANIS

Sorry. You want to do the poem for me?

PHOEBE

Why? Actually, Paul said to change it to respect for you, since the trial's pulled our family apart.

JANIS

Oh, God. I can hear his dad, "Honor thy father and mother." Roy doesn't know beans about me, about teaching, or the living breathing world, according to reality. Scientific realities.

PHOEBE

Okay, okay. Let Mrs. Whitaker tell me about fossils at school.

JANIS

At least she can! When I was a student, Teaching evolution was illegal. You should be proud that an Arkansas teacher changed that—the case went to the Supreme Court!

PHOEBE

Let somebody else do it again.

JANIS

Being involved is the best thing that's happened to me since—

PHOEBE

Paul's whole church prayed, and you got well?

JANIS

Good doctors, nurses—medical advances cured me.

PHOEBE

And daddy's cooking.

JANIS

Some. And luck.

PHOEBE

Not prayers.

JANIS

It's what they do, honey. Some people get better—some don't. They aren't praying for me now.

PHOEBE

Actually, kind of. There's a prayer chain for the trial.

JANIS

I'll support what's right, no matter what they pray or how loud they say it.

PHOEBE

If they're so wrong, how'd the law get passed?

JANIS

Political trickery by a national group that published so-called science books based on Genesis. They peddled them to legislators, who wrote a bill making me "balance" teaching evolution and creationism. Our governor signed in a flash, before anyone discussed the damn thing.

PHOEBE

Balance sounds fair.

JANIS

Hell, the theory of gravity doesn't fit on the same scale with "God's Word!" Here's more bullshit: my "belief" in evolution violates their religious freedom. How crazy is that?

PHOEBE

You preach science.

JANIS

Teach.

PHOEBE

We don't even have a Bible.

JANIS

There was one, somewhere.

PHOEBE

Mine, from third grade Promotion Sunday. In my room.

JANIS

You're reading it?

PHOEBE

Because you'll be on the news, and we'll be harassed!

JANIS

By whom? You're a cheerleader, for God's sake!

PHOEBE

Are you an atheist? Don't make them call us atheists!

(Pause.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

Maybe we should pray—

JANIS

Honey, you look feverish.

PHOEBE

I'm fine. Paul and I pray when—when we're, like tense.

JANIS

Couples sure weren't into that in my day.

PHOEBE

If you had been, maybe you and Daddy—

JANIS

Go practice your damn poem.

PHOEBE

I told Daddy to pray, too.

JANIS

The weather jokester?

PHOEBE

He's worried about us.

JANIS

How do you know?

PHOEBE

Carol Ann dropped me at the station after school.

JANIS

For poetry practice. Honey, I have work. You do, too.

(Janis stacks her piles of papers.)

PHOEBE

I told him about my nightmare—from last night—because parts were like pieces of broken

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

memory—back when I was three or four. Daddy sat me on your bed and was doing a magic show for us—like when he was the station clown.

JANIS

“Funny Bone Zone” was my nightmare.

PHOEBE

I kept asking, but he wouldn't say why you were under the covers looking sick. We watched him pull out flowers, a bluebird, even the coin from behind my ear. You wore that silky peach gown, and he pulled out pink scarves and tossed them over our heads.

JANIS

Phoebe, come to me, if you can't sleep.

PHOEBE

How? I couldn't wake myself up, couldn't move! Everything changed, and the scarves kept coming and coming, turning red, and darker, like blood. Then you got so pale and—you faded and spun into a wispy cloud that vanished! I tried to grab you, but the walls fell away, the bed was sinking, and Daddy couldn't reach me. He was crying at the sky! What part of that was real, do you remember?

JANIS

We laughed at lots of Ben's tricks.

PHOEBE

What does the dream mean?

JANIS

Don't mine dreams for facts. A nightmare is an unconscious response to stress, a bunch of mixed up images.

PHOEBE

Like symbols. Dreams are really big in poetry—and the Bible. People do learn things from them, Mom.

JANIS

Because bits are recognizable. Dreams transform parts of real occurrences, past and present.

PHOEBE

So, some of it's true.

JANIS

Over time, you witnessed my illnesses and Ben's magic shows.

PHOEBE

It felt like a prediction, but I couldn't do anything! What's going to happen?

JANIS

Look, I'm well, and Ben still acts the clown. If your dream recurs, don't struggle. Relax, and disappear with me into the clouds.

PHOEBE

You're joking?

JANIS

Like Ben. He blows off storm clouds—sweeps his horizon clean.

PHOEBE

Talk to him, Mom.

JANIS

I'm more concerned about you. Don't worry about Bible thumpers. Hell, there are preachers on my side. You know Victor Akins, the basketball player at school?

PHOEBE

Who doesn't?

JANIS

Right. His dad works with the Methodist bishop, who's also testifying.

PHOEBE

Did he call, when I was outside?

JANIS

Who?

PHOEBE

Victor.

JANIS

No.

PHOEBE

I heard the phone.

JANIS

Nothing but a hang up.

PHOEBE

Someone hung up on me last night.

JANIS

Did they say anything?

PHOEBE

Just, click. Some creep saw your name in the paper—

JANIS

Forget it. Victor's one of my monitors.

PHOEBE

You didn't tell me that.

JANIS

You never ask about my monitors. Why's he calling?

PHOEBE

I asked him to listen to me practice at lunch tomorrow, unless it snows. We're in speech together.

JANIS

He can talk a blue streak.

PHOEBE

You should see him recite poetry. He explodes words with feelings.

JANIS

He's a charmer.

PHOEBE

What? You think something's going to "evolve" between me and your science monitor?

JANIS

No. Relationships aren't random. You chose Paul.

PHOEBE

You chose Daddy. For better or worse.

JANIS

Do you want to live with Ben?

PHOEBE

Maybe.

JANIS

Dreams aren't random either. The reasons for your bad ones will pop up wherever you sleep.

PHOEBE

If it snows tomorrow, Paul's coming over.

JANIS

Only if I'm stuck here, too.

PHOEBE

We know the rules. If school's open, I'll still rehearse with Victor.

JANIS

Either way, I want you to learn how life works. I mean literally, not in a poem or a Sunday School lesson. Take control of yourself, thrive! If some preacher says that the Lord blessed brown-eyed parents by giving them one blue-eyed child out of five, what should you think?

PHOEBE

That they'd be happy.

JANIS

Heredity.

PHOEBE

They'd probably be ecstatic!

JANIS

You should understand probability!

PHOEBE

I want to be happy!

JANIS

Damn it to hell!

(Phoebe strikes a posture of prayer.)

PHOEBE

Dear God, clear Mom's mind. Melt her heart so love can flow again to me and Daddy—

JANIS

If you were in my class,

PHOEBE

And please help her—

JANIS

I'd get you on the right track.

PHOEBE

to stop. Teaching me. Amen.

(Janis picks up the large stack of papers.)

JANIS

We learn. One way or another.

PHOEBE

(With a gesture.)

*“And God stepped out on space—
And He looked around and said,
‘I’m lonely—
I’ll make me a world.’”*

(Phoebe exits, as to her room. Janis exits, as to kitchen.)