

Life Science

A Play in Two Acts

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Characters

Janis Brighton	39, teacher swearing by science
Roy Sturdivant	36, preacher fighting for God
Paul Sturdivant	17, student pursuing achievement
Phoebe Brighton	15, cheerleader living through poetry
Ben Brighton	39, weather reporter spotting the silver lining
Victor Akins	16, basketball player perfecting shots at life
Reverend Ezekiel Akins	45, praying to God, depending on science

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 changing 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

(Evening in early December, 1981, a high school's biology classroom on Parents' Night. Janis addresses the audience as parents.)

JANIS

At the end of first semester, I like to reward students with some excitement. They plowed through chapters on physiology of plants and animals. Actually, they perked up reading about human cell structures. It shocked them that we lose 30,000 to 40,000 skin cells every hour.

(Pointing at a parent.)

Yes, calculate it! We shed almost a million in 24 hours. Back to their earned adventure: we'll dissect earthworms next week. You can imagine how studying life science expands curiosity and knowledge about the natural world. It will increase your students' future success at work and at home. They've come a long way, so encourage them to study thoroughly for the finals, spread it out, no cramming at the last minute! Biology's more demanding second semester. Science fair projects, which will be due in April, can be selected from topics like microbiology, botany, zoology, anatomy, or genetics. After the break, I'll send instructions home. As a parent, I know students resist our poking noses into their business, but ask about their projects. Your support's important! Thanks again for coming, and feel free to contact me if you have questions. Have a good evening, and enjoy the holidays!

(As Janis gathers her purse and briefcase, Roy enters.)

ROY

Evening, Janis.

JANIS

Hi, Roy.

ROY

It's my last open house.

JANIS

Graduation's a milestone. I know you're proud of Paul

ROY

Yep, he's sailing through. I will admit, you teachers do a bang up job.

JANIS

Well, thanks.

ROY

I mean it. I never had to push him.

JANIS

Paul was easy to teach.

ROY

He's a good boy. But I'm sure you want to reach all the kids, especially those who are lost, who need more.

JANIS

Can we walk?

ROY

Just give me a minute.

JANIS

I've got the usual stack of papers—

ROY

Please. With all respect, Janis, you should drop this trial business.

JANIS

I'll testify—for the benefit of all the kids you just mentioned.

ROY

The governor signed the bill so our children can understand their world, all of nature, if you will. Why not make your curriculum broader?

JANIS

Because creationism isn't science.

ROY

Your job is

ROY (Cont'd)

—serving us.

JANIS

—teaching.

JANIS (Cont'd)

science, not religion.

ROY

The law has no reference to the Bible or church.

JANIS

We'll see what the judge says about that.

ROY

I'm thinking of Phoebe's feelings. You should, too.

JANIS

What do you mean?

ROY

The Lord loves you and Phoebe, but He will prevail. She wouldn't want to see you hurt. Protect her, Janis.

JANIS

I've got to go.

ROY

He gives us choices.

JANIS

And reason. Merry Christmas, if we don't visit before then.

ROY

Oh, I'll be at the courthouse, early in the morning.

JANIS

(Exiting.)

'Bye, Roy.

ROY

'Bye.

(He walks into a church meeting, as Paul enters, separately.)

PAUL

Dad, can I cut out early?

ROY

No.

PAUL

Phoebe's waiting on me.

ROY

We'll be quick. Phoebe needs you for sure. I talked to Janis.

PAUL

Not at school!

ROY

Yep, and she's got her back up.

(He gestures Paul to sit, then opens his Bible and addresses the audience as church members.)

ROY (Cont'd)

Evening, everybody. It's a blessing that you've turned out to toil for the Lord! This meeting needn't be long. Hear now God's Word: Psalm, number 33, 4 through 11.

(Reading.)

For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever.

(Speaking again.)

Amen, brothers and sisters! Let us be steadfast in prayer. Not only you, gathered here, but our whole community praying together. The Daughters of Wisdom will pass out copies of our phone chain as you exit. Find your name and note those you're assigned to call. Check with the office daily, and Ruby Lynn will give you new prayer points. Generally, we pray that God leads the judge to preserve Act 590. We'll address other challenges if they arise. Now, if you're riding to the courthouse with us, be here at 8:00 tomorrow. Bless you for standing strong for the Lord! Please bow with me.

(Praying.)

Heavenly Father, We're grateful for all you've given us. Bless us in the battle so that we might fulfill your will for the world's salvation. Guide us this week and keep us forever in your care. In Jesus' name, Amen.

(He and Paul exit. Janis enters her living room, sits, arranging stacks of biology papers. Wearing a boy's letter jacket, Phoebe enters with an opened gift box, bow askew.)

PHOEBE

(Pulling out a stuffed monkey.)

How cute!

(Reading a note.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

"Swinging by to wish you luck! Love, Ben." You threw it away?

JANIS

Because it's not a damned "monkey trial."

PHOEBE

(Laughing.)

Oh, now I get it.

JANIS

Roses would've been nice. Cut the stems under fresh water, and they'd be beautiful all week.

PHOEBE

At least Daddy cares. Paul's not even here yet.

JANIS

Oh, hell. He's coming this late?

PHOEBE

There's some meeting after Bible fellowship tonight.

JANIS

Jesus. He can't be over here late on a school night. Y'all know that.

PHOEBE

Fine. I'll keep him outside on the porch. In the cold.

(Phoebe goes.)

JANIS

Wait. Is that Paul's letter jacket?

PHOEBE

Mom. Really? No.

JANIS

I'm confused.

PHOEBE

It's Victor's.

JANIS

Akins? My Victor gave it to you?

PHOEBE

Sort of!

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

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

Paul, hurry! Before I freeze to death!

PAUL

I doubt it, wearing that dang letter jacket. Where'd it come from?

PHOEBE

A guy left it in speech class, Friday.

PAUL

Dump it now, or well, inside.

PHOEBE

Don't go in. Mom's got the timer on us.

PAUL

In the morning: drop it at Lost and Found.

PHOEBE

That's what I was going to do.

(Paul slips jacket off her and drops it.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

(Snuggling with him.)

Why'd you have to meet so late?

PAUL

The phone chain—you know, to tell members about the trial.

PHOEBE

Why? That stuff's all over the news.

PAUL

It's how Dad gives daily updates to the prayer teams.

PHOEBE

Teams. Praying against Mom?

PAUL

Not against anyone—just to protect the new law: let students learn creation science. Teachers just make new lesson plans. No big deal.

PHOEBE.

Mom would hate that!

(Janis exits.)

PAUL

Don't be so dramatic. She's a strong teacher.

PHOEBE

I swear, she'd have to quit. Quit her career, Paul.

PAUL

(Laughing.)

No way! It'd take an army to drag her out of a classroom.

PHOEBE

You think it's right to make her teach something against her will?

PAUL

Teachers have guidelines. Stop worrying! Besides, I'm not in the dang phone chain. I just want to be with you.

PHOEBE

Until you go off to Liberty damn University.

PAUL

Hey, don't cuss. And don't knock my dreams.

PHOEBE

It's—I miss you already. Tonight you made me wait forever.

PAUL

I came as soon as I could, but if your mom's upset—

PHOEBE

We're okay out here.

PAUL
You know I hate to leave.

PHOEBE
Then, don't.

PAUL
But I have to hit the books anyway.

PHOEBE
After three damn minutes?

PAUL
Phoebe.

PHOEBE
Go on. College matters more than I do.

PAUL
I hate fighting. Try to understand. Prayer helps. Come on, I want you to.
(Taking her hand.)

Heavenly Father, thanks for bringing Phoebe and me together, heart to heart. Tonight, and whenever we're apart, give us strength. When she's lonely, comfort her. Give her hope for our future, and bless our love forever, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

(He clears his throat.)

PHOEBE
Oh, amen. Okay, good.

PAUL
See? The Lord's with us.

PHOEBE
I mean you—thinking about me that way, so sweet. Call me when you get home, like you used to.

PAUL
Ssshhh.

(He kisses her.)

PHOEBE
Was that you, or God?

PAUL
You're impossible! Lord, she didn't mean that.

PHOEBE
What'll we do Saturday night?

PAUL
Celebrate my last SAT!

PHOEBE
Yay! And my first speech trophy.

PAUL
That, too. What's the new poem?

PHOEBE
I didn't switch.

PAUL
But your voice isn't right for that one.

PHOEBE
They loved it in speech class!

PAUL
Because they love you—everybody does! Still, you don't sound like God.

PHOEBE
Who does?

PAUL
No offense, guys just sound more powerful.

PHOEBE
(Going for bass tones.)
You mean like this?

PAUL
So, now you're being plain weird.

PHOEBE
I'll get stronger.

(He embraces her.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

The lines are so beautiful.

(Reciting.)

Darkness covered everything. Blacker than a hundred midnights—I can feel it, Paul.

PAUL

But that's not the point. It's about God's power, not your feelings.

PHOEBE

Isn't darkness a world without love? And God brings light!

PAUL

Well, yeah. If that's what you feel. I'm just trying to help you win.

PHOEBE

If it snows tomorrow, promise you'll come back over— for a study break. I can look at other poems. Play with my voice, too, you know, practice with you.

PAUL

Okay, if school's out.

(They kiss.)

PAUL (Cont'd)

Hide this thing, until you get rid of it.

(He hands her the jacket.)

PHOEBE

We'll make hot chocolate.

PAUL

Sweet dreams.

(Paul exits. Phoebe enters the house, lays jacket on a chair and turns on television. Spotlight on Ben, wrapping up the 10 o'clock weather report in the studio. She watches him on the screen.)

BEN

Tonight's low: twenty-eight degrees, not too unusual for early December. We could see a few snowflakes—but no accumulation. You kiddos crave a "snow day!" Well, wish, pray, or complain—this system of high pressure is holding back most moisture from the Gulf.

PHOEBE

Shit.

BEN

Roads won't be a problem, but watch for ice on the bridges. Tune in early tomorrow, on the outside chance a wintry mix causes closings or delayed openings. Students, if you have to go, take this cool joke to school: "What do you get when you cross the Abominable Snowman with Dracula?"

BEN (Cont'd) and PHOEBE

Frostbite!

(Janis enters with coffee cup.)

BEN (Cont'd)

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

PHOEBE

Not in a million years.

(Janis turns off television. Ben exits.)

PHOEBE

That's Daddy!

JANIS

His forecast's over. Where's Paul?

PHOEBE

Gone.

JANIS

Was he pissed off about that letter jacket?

PHOEBE

He had to study.

JANIS

Well, good for him. What about your homework?

PHOEBE

Done.

JANIS

Want me to look over something with you?

PHOEBE

No. I've got to practice my poem.

JANIS

Oh, right. When's the speech contest?

PHOEBE

Saturday.

JANIS

Oh, Right. Good luck, honey.

PHOEBE

Thanks. It's a long one, but beautiful.

JANIS

What did you choose this time?

PHOEBE

"The Creation."

JANIS

Oh hell, Phoebe.

PHOEBE

It has nothing to do with your crazy trial.

JANIS

With creationism in the paper every day? I'll bet Roy—and Paul—influenced your choice!

PHOEBE

Oh, Mom. Sure.

JANIS

Roy begged me to not testify, tonight at school. I wish Paul could rebel, just one damned time.

PHOEBE

Hah! Paul told me *not* to do the poem!

JANIS
Did "Honor your mother" take precedence this time?

PHOEBE
Not really.

JANIS
Then what's his angle?

PHOEBE
I don't sound like God.

JANIS
Jesus! That's worse.

PHOEBE
He means to help! I've been working so hard—

JANIS
I know.

PHOEBE
—with Victor, too.

JANIS
Oh.

PHOEBE
In Speech.

JANIS
I see.

PHOEBE
We worked right up to the bell Friday—he had to rush to the gym.

JANIS
Ah, and left his jacket.

PHOEBE
Yeah. Did you know he loves reciting poetry?

JANIS
I didn't.

PHOEBE

Because he's your science monitor. You should pay attention to other subjects, Mom.
(Pause.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

I mean, you're great teaching science, but winning a trial won't make the whole world love it. I wish you could admit that!

(Phoebe exits. Janis blocks her path.)

JANIS

Most people don't want to know the real world—or "Mother Nature" to your poets. They prefer living happily as scientific imbeciles! Honey, my loving science and its methods isn't the issue. It's the basis of biology, of life science, which you and everyone on the planet should better understand!

PHOEBE

Chill, Mom. I'll hear all about fossils from Mrs. Whitaker.

JANIS

You're lucky! When I was in school, teaching evolution was illegal. You should be proud that a teacher went to court in 1965, and she didn't quit fighting until the Supreme Court ruled in her favor in 1968.

PHOEBE

Nobody's saying you can't teach it. You just have to add new lessons!

JANIS

Damn it, you've been listening to Roy's shit. Those people have brought the fight back into our by God schools, and I won't have it!

PHOEBE

Let somebody else fight again!

JANIS

Why the hell should I?

PHOEBE

Because I don't want you to.

JANIS

Don't worry. It'll be all right, Phoebe.

PHOEBE

Paul's church is praying against you.

JANIS

Hell, they aren't Pope and his Cardinals! The guys who made Galileo recant and testify that the earth was the center of the universe. You know: in 16 damn 23? It was a sin to believe his telescope.

PHOEBE

You're not listening to me! Teachers can still teach evolution. They just have to balance it with creation science, right?

JANIS

Goddamit, you can't put scientific "theory" on a scale with the Bible! Look around. Is furniture floating in midair?

PHOEBE

No.

JANIS

Because you're looking at gravity, honey—invisible, like God. But measurable, which God isn't. Here's their new bullshit: my "belief" in evolution equals religion, so I'm violating their religious freedom.

PHOEBE

You preach science.

JANIS

Teach.

PHOEBE

We don't even have a Bible.

JANIS

There was one, somewhere around here.

PHOEBE

Mine, from third grade Promotion Sunday.

JANIS

Are you reading it?

PHOEBE

Yes. Because you'll be on the news. I'll get harassed!

JANIS

You're a cheerleader, for God's sake. And this trial's going to be over quickly. When the judge hears the testimony, he's not going to rule that I should teach science from Genesis.

PHOEBE

They'll call us atheists! Are you an atheist?

JANIS

No.

PHOEBE

You don't go to church. You don't want a Bible. We should pray—Paul and I pray when—when we're, like tense.

JANIS

Honey, you look feverish.

PHOEBE

I'm afraid—

JANIS

And you're scaring me.

PHOEBE

What about the afterlife? Can't measure that, so it isn't true, either?

JANIS

Calm down.

PHOEBE

I hate that!

JANIS

Phoebe, this has to wait! Go on practice your poem—

PHOEBE

I will. And I'll win!

JANIS

Give Victor that jacket tomorrow.

PHOEBE

If it snows, Paul's coming over to study.

JANIS

Only if I'm stuck here, too.

PHOEBE

We know the rules.

JANIS

Okay. Please, hear one more thing: the rules of science help you understand life. They aren't like poetry metaphors or Sunday School lessons. You must learn to take care of yourself— thrive! Don't just let life happen to you.

PHOEBE

Like a gift from God.

JANIS

Look, if some preacher says that the Lord blessed brown-eyed parents by giving them one blue-eyed girl out of five brown-eyed boys, what would you know?

PHOEBE

That they'd be happy.

JANIS

Heredity's involved. Can you explain?

PHOEBE

They'd probably be ecstatic!

JANIS

Learn about probability and genetics! Know what you're made of and what choices to make.

PHOEBE

I want to be happy!

JANIS

That's what I'm talking about. Why the hell won't you listen?

(Phoebe strikes a posture of prayer.)

PHOEBE

Dear God, clear Mom's mind. Bring her close to me again—

JANIS

Phoebe, be reasonable.

PHOEBE
Please melt her heart—and
help her to stop—

JANIS
Stop it! I swear, if you were
in my class, I'd—

(Janis pauses to hear Phoebe's point.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)
teaching me.

JANIS
put you on track.

PHOEBE
And let love flow between us again.

(Pause.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)
Amen.

(Janis picks up the large stack of papers.)

JANIS
We learn what's crucial. One way or another.

PHOEBE
(Reciting.)
*"And God stepped out on space—
And He looked around and said,
'I'm lonely— I'll make me a world.'"*

(Janis exits. Phoebe goes outside.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)
*"And as far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything.
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp."*

(Blackout.)