

Act I

Day One

(Monday evening in early December, 1981. In her living room, PHOEBE studies Bible verses to rehearse poetry interpretation of "The Creation.")

PHOEBE

(Reading.)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And it goes . . . darkness was upon the face of the deep; . . . and And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and . . . He split light, darkness, so: Day, Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

(PHOEBE stands with poetry script.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

(Reciting.)

*And God stepped out on space,
And he looked around and said:
I'm lonely—*

(With a sigh.)

Like totally.

(Reciting.)

I'll make me a world.

(BEN enters, unseen, as from kitchen, and watches PHOEBE.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

*And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights
Down in a cypress swamp.*

BEN

Here comes the sun!

PHOEBE

Daddy!

(Laughing.)

Don't wig me out! Mom'll be here any minute.

BEN

I know, I know.

PHOEBE

Paul's coming, too, but not through the back door!

BEN

Never when you're alone, either! Right?

PHOEBE

Yeah, right. What's that?

BEN

(Handing her a boxed gift.)

The perfect gift: going straight to Mom's heart.

PHOEBE

For real?

BEN

I promise. Just be sure she finds it tonight. Sugar, you're growing a rich voice—keep it up. Catch me on air at 10?

PHOEBE

Like always.

BEN

But you didn't see me here, right?

PHOEBE

Right, you better split!

BEN

I'll be back soon. To stay.

PHOEBE

Please, Daddy.

(BEN kisses her cheek and exits. She follows, as if to say more, exiting. Enters without gift.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

(Finding place in script, smiling.)

*Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,*

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

*And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said: That's good!*

*(Blackout on PHOEBE. JANIS addresses the audience as parents
in her biology classroom during the school's open house.)*

JANIS

After plowing through chapters on physiology, your students have earned some excitement. Actually, they perked up about animal cell structures, shocked to learn that humans lose 30,000 to 40,000 skin cells every hour.

(Pointing at a parent.)

Yes, calculate! We shed almost a million skin cells in twenty-four hours. Studying life science pricks curiosity, and you'll hear stories about dissecting earthworms next week! In this class they learn that science channels curiosity methodically, leading to knowledge that improves our world. Please encourage your students to study for the finals, spread it out, no cramming at the last minute! Class work is more demanding second semester. Science fair projects will be due in April, and they can begin considering topics: 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 stay involved with their assignments. Thanks again for coming, and enjoy the holidays!

(As JANIS gathers her purse and briefcase, ROY enters.)

ROY

Evening, Janis.

JANIS

Hi, Roy.

ROY

Checked off my last open house.

JANIS

A milestone. You're proud of Paul

ROY

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

JANIS

Thanks. Can we walk?

ROY

Just give me a minute. Paul works hard. But I'm sure you want to reach all the kids, especially those who need more. With all respect, Janis, I think you ought to drop this

ROY (Cont'd)

trial business.

JANIS

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

ROY

The law lets children understand their world, all of nature, if you will.

JANIS

Creationism isn't science.

ROY

Evolution's a theory with holes in it. Your job is

ROY (Cont'd)

—serving us.

JANIS

—teaching.

JANIS (Cont'd)

Science, not religion.

ROY

Our kids can feel lost enough without parents fighting over school. Think about Phoebe's feelings.

JANIS

What?

ROY

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

JANIS

I do.

ROY

God gives us choices.

JANIS

And reason to guide us in choosing. Merry Christmas, if we don't visit before then.

ROY

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

JANIS

'Night, Roy.

ROY

'Bye, Janis.

(JANIS exits. ROY walks into a church meeting, as PAUL enters, separately.)

PAUL

Dad, can I cut out early?

ROY

No. We'll be quick.

PAUL

Phoebe's waiting on me.

ROY

She needs you for sure. I talked to Janis.

PAUL

At school?

ROY

Yep.

PAUL

Dad, not about the trial.

ROY

She's got her back up.

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

ROY (Cont'd)

Evening, everybody. It's a blessing you're here to stand for our Creator God. The meeting won't last long. Let's begin with Psalm, 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. We stand at a turning point, with victory in hand! My Cynthia

ROY (Cont'd)

worked with many of you to bring religious clubs into schools, and that's still our dream. Now, the Lord calls us to unite our community in prayer to defend the law allowing science lessons to reference facts about creationism according to His plan! I thank the Sisters in Spirit for organizing our phone chain. As you exit, they'll hand you lists of names of prayer partners to call. Generally, we pray that God leads the judge to preserve Act 590. Please do call the office each day asking Ruby Lynn for any new prayer points. If you're riding to the courthouse with us in the morning, be here at 8:00. Let's fill the bus! Please bow with me.

(Praying.)

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

ROY (Cont'd)

Many thanks, and Lord bless you!

(ROY 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. She pulls out a stuffed monkey, and, smiling, shows JANIS, who says nothing.)

PHOEBE

(Reading a note.)

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

JANIS

It's not a damned "monkey trial."

PHOEBE

(Laughing.)

Oh, I get it.

JANIS

Just another flat joke.

PHOEBE

That's bogus. What do you want, anyway, Mom?

JANIS

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

PHOEBE

Be glad Daddy cares!

JANIS

He dropped by and left it with you?

PHOEBE

I said I found it in the trash. I'd love a sweet surprise, but Paul's not even here yet.

JANIS

Oh, hell. Coming this late?

PHOEBE

After some church meeting.

JANIS

My God, Phoebe. It's a school night..

PHOEBE

I'll keep him outside on the cold porch.

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 porch. JANIS organizes papers. PAUL enters.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

Paul, hurry! Before I freeze to death!

PAUL

I doubt it. Where'd that grody jacket come from?

(PAUL slips jacket off her. She takes it back and puts it on.)

PHOEBE

We're stuck here. Mom's bitching—

PAUL

Oh. Well, hey: she's here. Dig me?

PHOEBE

Paul. I'm sorry.

(PHOEBE leans her forehead to touch his. He clears his throat.)

PAUL

Then first thing in the morning, dump it at Lost and Found.

PHOEBE

I was going to.

(Hugging him.)

Why'd you have to meet so late?

PAUL

The phone chain—you know, for the trial.

PHOEBE

Why? That stuff's all over the news.

PAUL

Prayer teams get daily updates.

PHOEBE

Teams. Against Mom?

PAUL

Not against anyone—to protect the law, you know. Teachers just make new lesson plans to add creation science. No big deal.

PHOEBE

Dream on! Mom will be tripping all over the place. I swear, she'd have to quit. Quit her career, Paul.

(JANIS exits.)

PAUL

(Laughing.)

It'd take an army to drag her out of a classroom. Drop it. I just want to be with you, drama queen.

PHOEBE

Because you didn't see me the whole weekend.

PAUL

You know why.

PHOEBE

Yeah. And in a few months, you go off to Liberty damn University.

PAUL

Don't cuss. You want me to get into Liberty, too..

PHOEBE

It's—I miss you already.

PAUL

I came fast as I could.

(Holding her.)

And I always hate to leave.

PHOEBE

Then, don't.

PAUL

But I really have to hit the books.

PHOEBE

After three minutes? College matters more than I do.

PAUL

I won't fight with you.

PHOEBE

Go on.

(Pause.)

PAUL

Prayer helps. Come on, Phoebe.

(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.

(PAUL clears his throat.)

PHOEBE

Oh, Amen. Sweet.

PAUL

See? The Lord's with us.

PHOEBE

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

PAUL

Ssshhh.

(PAUL kisses her.)

PHOEBE

Was that you, or God?

PAUL

You're impossible!

(With a laugh.)

Lord, she didn't mean that.

PHOEBE

What'll we do Friday night?

PAUL

Maybe get a Coke. My last S.A.T.'s Saturday.

PHOEBE

Look, Friday, after tournament prelims, we can take a break, Paul. I want to see you!

PAUL

You're a good incentive.

PHOEBE

And celebrate to the max Saturday night!

PAUL

Totally. What's the new poem?

PHOEBE

I didn't switch.

PAUL

What about your voice?

PHOEBE

They loved it in speech class!

PAUL

Because they love you—everybody does! But you don't sound like God.

PHOEBE

Who can?

PAUL

A guy's voice has more power.

PHOEBE

(Going for bass tones.)

You mean like this?

PAUL

So, now you're being a dork.

(Paul 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

I don't think that's the point, Phoebe. 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. I'll look at other poems. You know, and practice it with you.

PAUL

Okay, if school's out.

(PHOEBE kisses PAUL.)

PAUL (Cont'd)
(Slipping the jacket off her.)

Hide this thing, until you get rid of it.

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
(Both with a laugh.)

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 jumps up in protest.)

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

Friday and Saturday.

JANIS

Good luck, Honey. What did you choose this time?

PHOEBE

"The Creation."

JANIS

Oh hell, Phoebe.

PHOEBE

It has nothing to do with the crazy trial.

JANIS

Out of all those poems you love? I'll bet Paul's prints are all over that pick.

PHOEBE

Oh, Mom. Sure.

JANIS

Tonight Roy told me not to testify.

PHOEBE

Did you flip him off?

JANIS

No! But I wish Paul could rebel, just one damned time.

PHOEBE

Inside skinny: Paul told me not to do the poem.

JANIS

Because you should, “Honor your mother?”

PHOEBE

Paul honors mothers.

JANIS

Cynthia. I’m sorry, Phoebe.

(Pause.)

PHOEBE

He says I don’t sound like God.

JANIS

Really.

PHOEBE

Which is kind of true.

JANIS

Well, that’s much worse in my book!

PHOEBE

I’m working so hard.

JANIS

I know.

PHOEBE

—with Victor, too.

JANIS

Oh.

PHOEBE

In Speech. We worked right up to the bell today—he had to rush to the gym.

JANIS

Ah, and left his jacket.

PHOEBE

Yeah. Did you know he loves reciting poetry?

JANIS

No.

PHOEBE

Because he's your science monitor. But he's really talented. You should pay attention to other subjects, Mom.

(Pause.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

I mean, you're great teaching biology, but there's lots more to care about. Winning a trial won't make the whole world love science. See? I wish you could admit that.

(PHOEBE leaves, but JANIS blocks her path.)

JANIS

I get that many people don't want to know much about science or even "Mother Nature," as poets say. They're happy as long as technology makes them comfortable and pads their pocketbooks.

PHOEBE

Chill pill, Mom.

JANIS

Honey, the issue isn't my loving science. The theory of evolution is basic to biology, which you and everyone else on the planet need to understand!

PHOEBE

I'll hear all about fossils from Mrs. Whitaker.

JANIS

Lucky you! It was illegal to teach evolution, when I was in school. A teacher went to court in 1965 and fought until the Supreme Court ruled in her favor in 1968, only thirteen years ago.

PHOEBE

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

JANIS

Bull shit according to Roy and his people who threw the battle back into schools.

PHOEBE

Let somebody else fight!

JANIS

Not when it's happening in my state, my town, my own yard!

PHOEBE

Mine, too, and I don't want you to do this.

JANIS

It'll be all right, Phoebe.

PHOEBE

Paul's whole church is praying against you.

JANIS

Hell, it's what they do. But they aren't the Pope and his Cardinals! In sixteen damn twenty-three they made Galileo testify that the earth was the center of the universe.

PHOEBE

Ancient history, Mom.

JANIS

Because it was a sin to believe his telescope.

PHOEBE

This is "creation science." Paul says you just have to balance it with evolution.

JANIS

Just screw Paul!

PHOEBE

Mom!

JANIS

Hell, I take that back! Listen, they're promoting Genesis, Phoebe. You can't put proven scientific theory on a damn scale with the Bible! Look around. Is furniture floating in midair?

PHOEBE

No.

JANIS

Why?

PHOEBE

We're not on the moon! Gravity. Obviously.

JANIS

And it's invisible, like God. But measurable, which God isn't. Science is about observing and measuring what we perceive in the physical world. Discovering truth through the scientific method isn't the same experience as religious faith. Honey, I have to fight, or the next twist in this bullshit argument will be that my "belief" in evolution equals religion. Imagine: if I teach it without creationism, I'll be accused of violating students' religious freedom!

PHOEBE

You preach science, Mom.

JANIS

Teach.

PHOEBE

You act like we don't even have a Bible.

JANIS

There is one, somewhere around here.

PHOEBE

Mine, from third grade Promotion Sunday.

JANIS

Are you reading it?

PHOEBE

Yes, to rehearse my poem. But, beside that: you'll be on the news. I'll get harassed!

JANIS

You're a cheerleader, for God's sake.

PHOEBE

Everybody will call us atheists!

JANIS

When the judge hears the testimony, he's not going to rule that I should teach science from Genesis.

PHOEBE

They'll say we're going to Hell. Are you an atheist?

JANIS

No.

PHOEBE

You don't go to church. You don't care about 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? Paul's happy his mom's in heaven. It can't be measured, so it isn't true?

JANIS

Calm down.

PHOEBE

I hate that!

JANIS

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

PHOEBE

I will. I'll win!

JANIS

I hope you do. And give Victor his jacket tomorrow.

PHOEBE

You don't have to tell me.

(Pause.)

PHOEBE (Cont'd)

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

JANIS

Only if I'm stuck here, too.

PHOEBE

We know the rules.

JANIS

Okay, okay. Please listen: rules of science help you live. 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 child after five with brown eyes, 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! 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 don't you hear me?

(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

I'd get you on track.

PHOEBE

And let love flow between us—and Daddy—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."*

(PHOEBE exits into house and Off.)

Day Two

(Early afternoon Tuesday, as occasional snowflakes fall. Costumed as a gorilla, BEN cavorts outside the federal courthouse. ROY enters.)

ROY

(Laughing.)

Here's evolution run backwards: a fool turned ape!

(BEN cut some break dance moves. ROY flips Bible open.)

ROY (Cont'd)

(Reading.)

And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. . . . And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day."

(BEN slides on his knees, as ending his dance.)

ROY (Cont'd)

(Hand over Ben's head.)

Bless even you, Fool, to see the pearly gates. Now, shoo!

(BEN scrambles up, sails around as if with angel's wings, as JANIS and AKINS enter, separately.)

AKINS

Good afternoon, Janis.

JANIS

Hello, Reverend Akins.

(BEN dances to them and bows.)

AKINS

Slick moves. Is he friend or foe?

JANIS

Hard to tell.

ROY

Hi, Janis. That nut liked to spooked my people when I dropped them off. He ought to ask the Lord for some horse sense.

(BEN canters in a circle and shakes his head like a horse.)

JANIS

Reverend Akins, this is Roy Sturdivant. Victor probably knows his son Paul, Phoebe's boyfriend.

AKINS

Brother Roy Sturdivant?

ROY

That's me.

AKINS

As I recall, you lead the New Bible Fellowship.

ROY

Yep—and partner with Arkansas' Moral Majority. Now, where's your pulpit?

AKINS

Currently, I assist Bishop Steele, office of the Methodist conferences.

ROY

Oh, the one lined up with the plaintiffs.

AKINS

Although you and I stand on common ground. We love to tell Genesis stories in Sunday School, and our pastors preach from Scripture. We can cherish religious freedom as we support public education. And both our boys are Bobcats.

ROY

How's that? Paul's a good Christian.

JANIS

At school, Roy, we're the Bobcats.

ROY

Oh, sure. But Paul's no jock. He's serious-minded: Student Council vice-president, ninth in his class. I'm sure his head's in a book at home right now.

AKINS

Victor plays basketball, and snowflakes didn't stop coach from calling ball practice this morning. Why'd they cancel school today?

JANIS

Iffy weather. Nobody wants a school bus sliding into the ditch.

ROY

Well, it didn't keep the wheels of law from turning, and here we are. Reverend, I regret that we don't see eye to eye on Act 590, but it beats me how any believer can testify against putting knowledge of God's creation back in schools.

(From a hairy pocket, BEN pulls two balloons and quickly twists them into a dinosaur.)

ROY (Cont'd)

To my mind, the law makes science lessons better, adds a true viewpoint. There's lots of questions about evolution, which is just a theory.

(BEN presents dinosaur to ROY.)

ROY (Cont'd)

What in tarnation?

JANIS

A dinosaur, which would have sunk Noah's ark.

ROY

Pitiful joke. God made dinosaurs walk the earth, and He saved Noah—saves us still.

(BEN holds up two fingers.)

JANIS (Cont'd)

Could students believe that two dinosaurs got on the boat?

(BEN makes a balloon heart.)

ROY

God could have plucked up two dinosaur babies or decided their time had ended. Like I said when you were sick, Janis, all things are possible through Him. We're at cross purposes here, but you know I pray God's blessings on you and your family.

JANIS

Thanks, Roy.

(Bowing, BEN presents heart to JANIS.)

JANIS (Cont'd)

And thank you.

ROY

Tell me, Brother Akins, do you agree with Janis that the monkey yonder is your uncle?

AKINS

Maybe not him, but, generally, yes. Yours, too, which makes us cousins.

(BEN applauds. AKINS nods a "thanks.")

ROY

I get your drift, Reverend.

JANIS

Please excuse us, Roy—the sooner this trial begins, the sooner my curriculum's rescued.