Lafayette & Lafayette Act I **Decision**

(Saturday, March 24, 1781, Williamsburg, Virginia. Room sparsely furnished. Kitchen table downstage center on which is a chess set oriented with white upstage and black downstage. James is in a chair at the table facing downstage, deeply pondering the chessboard on which moves have been made. Another chair is at the table to his right. James is thirty-two years old, black, and stocky. He is temperate and thoughtful. A work table is upstage left with a chair beside. Unfolded clothes are piled on the work table. Sylvia, James’s wife, is standing upstage, behind the work table, mending a sock. She is black, intense, and free spirited. It is mid-morning. Three books are on the table to Sylvia’s left: the King James Bible, Plutarch’s “Lives,” and Cicero’s “On Duty.”)

***James:*** (Without looking up. Intent on chess.) Today will be a good day. (Moves a white piece.)

***Sylvia:*** (Gives him a deadpan look, goes back to mending.)

***James:*** William will come this afternoon. We will talk. (Moves a black piece.)

***Sylvia:*** (Gives him a glance, still says nothing.)

***James:*** Yes, sir. William is a good man. (Still looking at the board. Moves a white piece.)

***Sylvia:*** (Does not break stride, working seriously, does not look up.) William is not a good man. Not if he permits this, what you want to do.

***James:*** (Turns to face her.) I am pleased. We are speaking.

***Sylvia:*** (Ignores him.)

***James:*** I spoke prematurely. I see you are in no mind to be distracted. (Turns back. Moves a black piece. Turns again to face her.) I really love you when you are…(Gazes up, searching for the right word.)

***Sylvia:*** (Stops. Unsmiling. Stares at him, one brow raised.) Go on. Charm your way out. When I am what?

***James:*** Fastidious.

***Sylvia:*** Fastidious. I offer you an invitation back into my good grace, and the best you can do is ‘fastidious’?

***James:*** (Ponders.) Pulchritudinous?

***Sylvia:*** You are full of pusillanimity.

***James:*** (Still looking at her, smiling.) Do those Methodists know you talk like that? John Wesley himself would be shocked.

***Sylvia:*** John Wesley ministered to those heathens in Georgia. Nothing would shock him.

***James:*** I love it when you talk above your station.

***Sylvia:*** James! (As though calling him to task.) I do not talk above my station. The English language is a wonderful instrument. I learned it. I use it. I do not apologize for it. And I am not being pretentious, not in the least and you know it.

***James:*** Sylvia! (Returning the declamation.) Pu-sil-lan-im-i-ty. Six syllables. You did not tell me when we married that you knew words with six syllables. I would have married you sooner.

***Sylvia:*** (Back to her mending.) You are as bad as those Georgia heathens. You need a little Wesley and a lot of King James.

***James:*** “The sum of all villainies.” (Thoughtful) I remember you told me he said that.

***Sylvia:*** When I first heard that it was like a lightning bolt struck me. People are not property. I was Methodist on the spot, then and there.

***James:*** Ecclesiastes. (Said affirmatively, as though in reply.)

***Sylvia:*** (Gives a moment.) What of it?

***James:*** Ecclesiastes Three. There is a time and a place. Things will change. (Turns back to chess. Moves a white piece.)

***Sylvia:*** What makes you think so? “Plutarch? (Picks up “Lives.”) Cicero? (Picks up Cicero.) You have been saying that since we got married and all this time I see none of it. And you only know Ecclesiastes as far as it goes. (She picks up King James, flips to Ecclesiastes.) Ecclesiastes 9: 11-12, “I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.”

***James:*** (Turns around, facing her and stares.)

***Sylvia:*** What?

***James:*** You talk like we have been married forever. It’s only been six months.

***Sylvia:*** Well. It seems like seven.

***James:*** (Looks at her affectionately.) Things take time. You are so…cerebral.

***Sylvia:*** Fine. (Clipped, irritated.) And you have pineal gland shrinkage.

***James:*** Pineal gland. What are you talking about? What does that have to do with anything?

***Sylvia:*** It is the seat of your soul.

***James:*** Where did you get that?

***Sylvia:*** Rene Descartes. You are not the only one who reads. Some days, and this is one of them, your pineal gland shrinks.

***James:*** How do you know it shrinks?

***Sylvia:*** Whenever you think you have paid a woman, an attractive, desirable woman, a compliment by calling her cerebral or fastidious, your pineal must be the size of a mustard seed.

***James:*** Well. It is a compliment. (Silence.) You are different from any woman I have ever known.

***Sylvia:*** You mean any black woman?

***James:*** I mean any woman, black, white, or otherwise.

***Sylvia:*** What is an ‘otherwise’ woman?

***James:*** You’re smart. You have opinions. Misguided mostly, but opinions.

***Sylvia:*** (Throws a towel at him.) I work at it. Unlike you. I don’t open my mouth before I have given it some thought.

***James:*** Armistead women are the only other ones I really know. William’s mother, Agnes was her name, Mr. John’s wife, was kind. She could be condescending.

***Sylvia:*** I can’t stand that. I hate it.

***James:*** What?

***Sylvia:*** That thing white women do when they dart those eyes at me, just for a second. Looking down at me.

***James:*** You read too much into it. It doesn’t mean anything.

***Sylvia:*** It means something to me.

***James:*** You have to let things like that go.

***Sylvia:*** Easy for someone to say with a pineal gland the size of a mustard seed.

***James:*** They don’t even know they’re doing it. If you pointed it out it would surprise them. It is not a malicious thing.

***Sylvia:*** That tells me one thing. They’ve been doing it so long, it’s habit. For me, it is insult every time. I don’t care if it’s routine.

***James:*** Habits can change. They don’t think about it. They don’t give it an undistracted moment.

***Sylvia:*** Don’t give me that ‘undistracted moment’ thing. I think it is a slight and I don’t like it.

***James:*** I mean, look at William. I’ve been manservant to him since he was born, twenty-seven years ago. I was six. Mr. John wanted us to learn together so we could both help out with the business. We learned French together.

***Sylvia:*** That’s your example of how things change? You think William really thinks of you as anything more than a manservant? Why? Because you learned French together? Forgive my French, but that is stupid.

***James:*** He gave me today to be with you. He’s coming here this afternoon to talk. He didn’t have to. He takes me seriously.

***Sylvia:*** Maybe he feels guilty. Maybe Plutarch and Cicero gave him the idea that something is wrong.

***James:*** I don’t know about that. He loves to debate, but it’s not like he’s a meditator; he’s not a self-reflective sort. He takes things more as they are. He’s not given to undistracted moments to think about the way things ought to be.

***Sylvia:*** They should feel guilty. All of them.

***James:*** Maybe, when they all turn Methodist. Guilt will roll like thunder. (Back to chess. Moves a black piece.) It’s contingent. What happens, depends.

***Sylvia:*** Depends on what? Contingent on what?

***James:*** On what you do. What I do. What they do. Today comes out of yesterday. The change I want for tomorrow I prime today. It’s contingent. I am the sum of all my days. William knows that. William understands that.

***Sylvia:*** James.

***James:*** Whenever you do that ‘James’ I know I’m in for a scolding.

***Sylvia:*** (Silence.) Is that why you do this? All this Revolution talk? I don’t see that it’s your fight.

***James:*** I love that word. ‘Contingent.’

***Sylvia:*** You are in love with words. Period.

***James:*** Listen to the sound of it. ‘Contingent.’ It’s got a hardness, with expectation boiled in.

***Sylvia:*** I don’t see it. And you are ignoring me.

***James:*** (Moves a white piece.) You don’t see it. You feel it. Words have character.

***Sylvia:*** This is not your war. The words do not apply to you. They’ll never work for you, or for me, or for our children.

***James:*** (Turns back to her.) Why do you say that?

***Sylvia:*** Because it’s true. It’s five years since those high borne ‘self-evident’ truths were pitched. I don’t see it accomplished anything.

***James:*** (Gets up. Faces audience. Hands in pockets. Understated.) You cannot say things like they said, and then tell the world you said it, and things not change.

***Sylvia:*** You dream. You stand better chance at Portsmouth.

***James:*** That’s not the same.

***Sylvia:*** Says you. With the pineal gland the size of a mustard seed. The British are not hypocrites. Cross their lines and you are free.

***James:*** They don’t give us anything. They accept us because it serves their purpose.

***Sylvia:*** How do you know? Maybe it’s real. Food. Shelter. Freedom. How do you know?

***James:*** My pineal gland. It tells me.

***Sylvia:*** (Quietly.) My point exactly. It rattles like a pea in a cavern and you take it to say whatever you want to hear. When does William come?

***James:*** This afternoon.

***Sylvia:*** Your mind is made up?

***James:*** (Turns to face her.) It is.

***Sylvia:*** William will refuse. You’ll be disappointed.

***James:*** I don’t think so.

***Sylvia:*** You’re valuable to him. Why should he let you volunteer?

***James:*** He won’t refuse me. He won’t refuse Lafayette.

***Sylvia:*** You mean you won’t refuse Lafayette.

***James:*** William did talk to him, while he was selling supplies.

***Sylvia:*** So it was at the store, there at Williamsburg?

***James:*** (Nods.) I was going about my work. Next thing I know he’s beside me, calling my name. He and William had been talking about me.

***Sylvia:*** How do you know?

***James:*** He greeted me in French. William must have told him. He asked me why I admired Cicero. How else would he know that?

***Sylvia:*** An officer talking to a black man? In Williamsburg? In daylight?

***James:*** Times can change.

***Sylvia:*** Maybe the man, but not the times.

***James:*** William told me he’s a major general. He has General Washington’s confidence. He’s twenty-three.

***Sylvia:*** My age. He’s the one put this notion in your head.

***James:*** I’ve been thinking about it, but…yes…he said I could be of service. That’s what he told me, I could be of service.

***Sylvia:*** So, you made up your mind to enlist.

***James:*** No. No. I won’t enlist. I’ll volunteer, if William permits it. I’ll be certain that way to be under his command.

***Sylvia:*** I don’t like this. Why can’t somebody else be high minded? Why did I marry someone who thinks he can change the world? Nobody else thinks like that.

***James:*** At least one other person does, I think.

***Sylvia:*** Who?

***James:*** William.

***Sylvia:*** (Quiet a moment.) Who’s winning? (Points to the chess board.)

***James:*** (Looks back at the chess board.) I am. I always win.

***Sylvia:*** When you play yourself. Chess is a woman’s game. Let me show you how it’s done. Again.

***James:*** (Moves his chair to his right. Sylvia takes position that would have been to his left. She reorients the board, white toward him, black to her. He looks endearingly at her.) You, I love.

***Sylvia:*** (She holds her hand up to stop him, leans forward intently.) Your move.

(Lights dim.)