Lafayette & Lafayette Act Two **Question**

(Same room. James downstage right. William sitting where Sylvia had sat and intently viewing the chess board. James is thirty-one years old. William is twenty-seven.)

***James:*** William.

***William:*** (Holds up his hand to interrupt, still intently studying the chessboard.) Who won this match?

***James***: Sylvia.

***William:*** This isn’t a win. It’s a triumph. You must feel drenched.

***James:*** Drenched?

***William:*** Yes. Drenched. In Humility.

***James:*** I married an intelligent woman.

***William:*** An intelligent woman. Some would say that’s an oxymoron.

***James:*** Then some would be ignorant.

***William:*** Or they don’t know Sylvia.

***James:*** Or Suzanna.

***William:*** My suzanna. A woman with opinions. James, you and I. We married paradoxes.

***James:*** Is that what you tell her in romantic moments, that she’s a paradox?

***William:*** Sure. All the time. She loves it when I call her a paradox. Isn’t that what you tell Sylvia?

***James:*** No. I tell her she’s ‘fastidious.’

***William:*** Fastidious. ‘Paradox’ has more power. Do you know, she says this war will “unbundle” women. That’s the word she uses, “unbundle.” I pity the man who tries to put a bit between her teeth.

***James:*** Sylvia says women when it comes to intellect are equal to men.

***William:*** Equal to men?

***James:*** That’s what she says.

***William:*** Count yourself lucky. My Suzanna says when it comes to intellect women are superior! She’s not bashful about it either.

***James:*** How does she think this war will help women? The Declaration doesn’t say anything about women.

***William:*** My Suzanna says you have to read in undistracted moments. That’s the phrase she uses, “undistracted moments.” Men, she says, when they read, if they read at all, do not think it through. She says the big story is between the lines.

***James:*** But how do you see that she thinks the war will help her. It says, “All men are created equal.”

***William:*** It says that, she says, because men are self-absorbed. There’s nothing malicious in it. It’s like ritual. It’s just the way it’s always been done. They take it for granted when they say “all men.” It’s routine.

***James:*** Still, it says, “Men.” It doesn’t say “Men and women.”

***William:*** That’s just the poetry of it. It flows to say “All men are created equal.’ It’s not as poetic to say, “All men and women are created equal.”

***James:*** “All men and women are created equal.” Doesn’t have poetic power? Is that the point, poetic power?

***William:*** Men think small; it’s a default position. Just do it and say it the way it’s always been done and said. That’s what my Suzanna says.

***James:*** Sylvia says it’s the pineal gland.

***William***: The pineal gland?

***James:*** Rene Descartes.

***William:*** Cogito ergo sum? That Descartes?

***James:*** The same. I don’t know anything about this pineal gland. But Descartes I know did say man is defined by thought. In which case “Man” is traditional shortcut for human beings.

***William:*** Which my Suzanna argues includes men and women.

***James:*** How do you ever win an argument with her?

***William:*** That woman reads. Then she thinks. In undistracted moments. Then we debate.

***James:*** Maybe you need to find a way to distract her undistracted moments. Sylvia and I do the same. She reads Cicero and Plutarch. She quotes my own heroes against me.

***William:*** I remember one time, we were arguing something, something about justice. She was getting fired up and really getting the better of me. I think I was arguing the sovereignty of justice over truth and at one point I told her, “Woman, stand down.” At that moment I felt fear. Had she a bit in hand she would have placed it in my mouth.

***James:*** (A moment.) Nobody lives like we do. Nobody sees things like we do.

***William:*** No. I suppose not. You know me better than anybody.

***James:*** I remember first time I saw you. I was six, I guess. You were the ugliest child. Your Mama kept saying how cute you were, and I’m thinking, what baby are we talking about. Put this one back. (Pauses.) You’re still ugly.

***William:*** For the longest time I thought you were my brother. I didn’t know.

***James:*** And when your father would take us on the rounds, down to the store and the tavern in Williamsburg, I’d tell people you were my little brother.

***William:*** I dreaded those rounds. It was work.

***James:*** Your father made us work, for sure.

***William:*** He did that. We’d sweep and clean. “You got to know the business from the broom up,” he’d say. He was a hard man.

***James:*** Then for one hour every day he made us read. At the time I didn’t think anything about it. I thought everyday everybody was inside reading at two in the afternoon. It was ritual.

***William:*** And he’d quiz us on what we read. Cicero and obligations. I had the hardest time keeping up with you.

***James:*** I think that was his plan. There was six years’ difference in our ages. He counted on your not wanting to be in second place, that you’d work harder competing with me. And I wanted to keep a step ahead of you.

***William:*** And remember those debates. His great pleasure was to put a proposition on the table, tell me I had the affirmative, you the negative, sometimes vice versa, and he would moderate.

***James:*** He told us we didn’t know what we thought until we spoke it, or better yet, wrote it out.

***William:*** “You don’t know what you think until you say it so people can understand it.” If he said it once, he said it a hundred times. You’re right; unless you could debate the point, he didn’t think you had a grip on whatever idea it was.

***James:*** Your father did that so we could take care of the business, but looking back, the books, the debate, it gave me hope. When I argue with Sylvia, it gives me hope, just the fact of it.

***William:*** Those debates. They were our undistracted moments, when we really had to think it through. You realize you confirm my Suzanna’s claim for female superiority. She says women are more capable of undistracted moments.

***James:*** Men are capable. We can expand our pineal glands.

***William:*** Perhaps. One thing you are right about. You are right that you and I, Sylvia and my Suzanna, we are different. I think it’s because of Cicero and Plutarch. It’s because of debate. You and I were raised on it. It made a difference.

***James:*** Things could have turned out otherwise. Today is contingent on yesterday. Today is the result of yesterday.

***William:*** You are chess-in-the-head today.

***James:*** It’s true. John Armistead, your father, decided that you and I would learn together because it would make our learning stick. He decided that we would debate each other because it makes the mind sharp. It didn’t have to happen that way. He was the agent. It was contingent.

***William:*** My father had purpose. He had perseverance.

***James:*** And he changed his little part of the world.

***William:*** Nobody lives like us. Nobody talks like us. Why do you think that is.

***James:*** Because nobody explained it to them. Nobody explained why Cicero is important.

***William:*** Do you think they care?

***James:*** I think most take care of what’s within reach. They don’t think beyond today, and most people do what they see other people do.

***William:*** It’s hard to think past today. We’re five years into war. I can only hope I can keep my work as commissary of military supplies. The farm can’t support us.

***James:*** Question. (Said as though he and William have a routine.)

***William:*** (Rights himself in his chair as part of this ritual.) State the question.

***James:*** Does justice have meaning on an island where you are the only inhabitant?

***William:*** No. Because justice is an act which…

***James:*** (Good natured, competitive.) That is not true.

***William:*** And you are out of order.

***James:*** On what grounds?

***William:*** We agreed we would not interrupt an argument in the making.

***James:*** I was not interrupting an argument. I was rescuing you from an untruth. But go ahead.

***William:*** As I was saying, justice is an act which demands two people.

***James:*** Are you finished? Is your reply complete?

***William:*** You win no points being uncivil and indecent to my reply. Rebut.

***James:*** Justice is not an act but an idea upon which we are called to act.

***William:*** Question.

***James:*** State the question.

***William:*** Have you been reading Plato? Again?

***James:*** Question.

***William:*** State the question.

***James:*** Have you been reading Aristotle? Again?

***William:*** I concede that justice is an idea, but without an act it has no meaning.

***James:*** If on this island which you inhabit there is a cow. Is justice on the island?

***William:*** No. Because cows have no right to which an act of justice can be applied.

***James:*** And what does a human have that a cow does not have that makes the human an object of justice?

***William:*** (Thoughtful. Raises his hand as though to request a moment of thought. Looks up confidently at James.) Regret.

***James:*** (Nods, in the fashion of a compliment.) Well done. (Thoughtful.) And what if on this island other than you there is me? Is justice on the island?

***William:*** Do we agree…

***James:*** You cannot answer a question with a question.

***William:*** (Waves it off.) Do we agree on the definition? Justice is an idea that demands action between or among human beings, our cow and its rights aside?

***James:*** Agreed. Your definition is true.

***William:*** Therefore, justice is on the island, and you concede truth is sovereign to justice.

***James:*** Would you own property on the island?

***William:*** No.

***James:*** Why?

***William:*** Because I would have no need of property on the island. I would not have constraints that oblige me to own property.

***James:*** What constraints?

***William:*** The very same constraints that shackle you to this farm. I have spent I don’t know how many undistracted moments thinking about those shackles.

***James:*** You have choice.

***William:*** One of only two things guaranteed us in this life. Everybody has choice. I sold cattle and thirty pieces of property, but it was choice forced, it was necessary to survival.

***James:*** Why stay? What keeps you here? Why not just leave?

***William:*** Where would I go? What would I do? This is my home. Born January 5, 1754. I’m twenty-seven years old. I’ve got ten years left, maybe. I’m not going anywhere. Start all over with what? It’s not so easy.

***James:*** Besides, nobody wants ugly. You are still ugly.

***William:*** You’re born here, not far, New Kent County, December 10, 1748, thirty-two years old. You are an old man. You know I release you to your own choices. Why haven’t you run away? You know I’m not stopping you.

***James:*** They tell me I’m a fool. Freedom is one step over the British lines. But to what end? I think things will change.

***William:*** Why? What makes you so sure?

***James:*** John Wesley and all those Methodists. He takes a stand. That’s what Sylvia says.

***William:*** You don’t know anything about Wesley and I for one know you don’t care anything about him. Besides, those Christians are a fickle bunch. And Wesley, I know Sylvia is taken with him, but he didn’t last long in America.

***James:*** He was dealing with Georgians. Who can blame him?

***William:*** Whitefield argues for shackles. That left eye of his roams. It’s hard to take him seriously. I don’t see how you really think change will come.

***James:*** The war. It will change minds.

*William:* Question.

***James:*** State the question.

***James:*** May I ask you something I wouldn’t ask of anyone else?

***William:*** You and I have talked about a lot of things we wouldn’t want anyone else to hear.

***James:*** Do you think the rebellion at Stono River was justified?

***William:*** They planned it for a Sunday when everybody would be in church.

***James:*** Lots of people died, on both sides. But was it justified?

***William:*** It led to more rebellion. More dying. Harsh penalties. It was a hate that hate created.

***James:*** Was it justified?

***William:*** Let me ask you something.

***James:*** Unfair. You cannot answer a question with a question.

***William:*** Cato the Younger could not abide Caesar’s lust for power. When Caesar came for him, knowing Caesar would execute him or worse, he disemboweled himself. Was Cato justified? Or was it futile drama?

***James:*** At Stono, the leader was literate. He painted a word on a sign and he had his men chant the word. The word was “Liberty.” Was it futile drama? This revolution, now, is it futile drama?

***William:*** Question.

***James:*** State the question.

***William:*** You wanted to see me. Why?

***James:*** What do you think? I mean, of yesterday? Do you trust him?

***William:*** It doesn’t matter whether I trust him or not. It’s not me he wants.

***James:*** It does matter. You would be lending him property. It might not be returned to you.

***William:*** I told you two years ago when father died, I have no claim on you.

***James:*** It’s not what the law says. You must give permission.

***William:*** Is it what you want? Do you want to do this?

***James:*** Do you trust him?

***William:*** I know his men respect him. General Washington must have confidence in him. Lord Cornwallis is the best the British have, and he’s here to take him on. He’s young.

***James:*** Twenty-three.

***William:*** Younger than we are.

***James:*** Sylvia’s age.

***William:*** He’s straight forward. He speaks English well.

***James:*** He speaks French well.

***William:*** Maybe it’s because he’s from France. I heard you two.

***James:*** I loaded supplies and he thanked me in French. I answered in French.

***William:*** Is that when he grabbed you?

***James:*** By both shoulders, he was so glad to speak to someone in his native French. Kissed me on both cheeks. Then he quizzed me in French.

***William:*** He is from France. French people kiss other people out of the blue like that. He watched you. I watched him watching you.

***James:*** What did he say? You talked to him.

***William:*** I told him how you came to speak French. He beamed when I told him you could speak French.

***James:*** What else.

***William:*** That you could read and write.

***James:*** You told him about Cicero.

***William:*** I told him, I’m not sure exactly, something about you were taken with Cicero.

***James:*** He asked me why I thought Cicero had it right. Did he tell you who he admires.

***William:*** He did. Somebody I can’t pronounce.

***James:*** Vercingetorix.

***William:*** Vercing…

***James:*** Vercingetorix. He was a Gaul, tried to unite Gauls against Caesar. He lost the Battle of Alesia.

***William:*** Was he beheaded?

***James:*** Just as well. He rode into Caesar’s camp alone. Put his armour at Caesar’s feet and surrendered himself.

***William:*** Why not just fight to the death.

***James:*** Caesar would have slaughtered thousands. Out of revenge. Vercingetorix gave himself up to save his men.

***William:*** It is the way of unchecked power. Revenge is human nature. If America loses this war, Britain will never forget. What happened to Vercingetorix?

***James:*** Vercingetorix. Caesar paraded him through the streets. Humiliated him. Then strangled him.

***William:*** What does Lafayette want with you?

***James:*** I’m not sure. He wants me to join him. Beyond that, I don’t know.

***William:*** What did you tell him?

***James:*** That I must talk with you. That you must permit it. Would you permit it?

***William:*** You could be killed.

***James:*** Worse. I might cut and run the first bullet I see coming toward me.

***William:*** Or you could just cross British lines.

***James:*** To what end?

***William:*** Freedom

***James:*** People flaunt words they don’t understand. I know about the flight from plantations to the promise of freedom across British lines. It’s technical. That’s all. It’s paper freedom.

***William:*** Do you think you’ll find more, fighting with Lafayette?

***James:*** I don’t know. The principles are right. Sometime, those principles must apply to everybody. Anyway, there is only one way to find out.

***William:*** You may be captured. You may be killed. I could lose my best workman. You want my permission to chance this? No one else in Virginia in my position would agree to this.

***James:*** You are correct.

***William:*** You don’t have to agree with me. Couldn’t you be more demanding? Maybe pound your fist on the table? Make my human nature betray the logic of what you ask?

***James:*** I talk with him tomorrow, if I have your blessing.

***William:*** My blessing? Now you want me to affirm your expedition. That’s more than permission.

***James:*** Question.

***William:*** State the question.

***James:*** Do I have you permission and your blessing to volunteer to serve with the Marquis de Lafayette?

***William:*** (Thoughtful.) You have my permission. You have my blessing.

**James:** (Sets up the chess pieces.)

***William:*** Let me tell you one more thing…

***James:*** (Holds up his hand to interrupt.) Play.

(Lights dim.)