

**BEG PARDON**

by

Philip Heckman

Characters

THOMAS JEFFERSON, white, age 70, a wealthy landowner

SALLY HEMINGS, black, age 40, a slave in Thomas' household

BEVERLY, black, age 14, Sally's oldest mixed-race son, also a slave

Costumes

Thomas is dressed as an early 19th-century American aristocrat. Sally and Beverly are dressed as slaves assigned to Thomas' main house and to his estate grounds, respectively.

Time

1810.

Setting

The study of a ruling class colonial-style house in the early 1800s, with a writing desk and chair and a door upstage, which leads offstage to the rest of the manor.

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**BEG PARDON**

*JEFFERSON is at his desk. There is an offstage interruption.*

BEVERLY (O.S.)

Ma-ma!

*BEVERLY has an indistinct O.S. exchange with SALLY. When it's over, JEFFERSON extends the fingers of his free hand one by one. At "five" SALLY bursts in.*

SALLY

What are you thinking?

JEFFERSON

I'm thinking that a pauper must be the most envied of men--so encumbered as to be of no further interest to his creditors.

SALLY

Don't be flippant. You know what I mean.

JEFFERSON

Truly. I don't.

SALLY

Sylvie.

JEFFERSON

Who's Sylvie?

SALLY

The goat, the one Beverly just told me will be your dinner.

JEFFERSON

I didn't realize she'd been christened.

SALLY

Eston named her. He loves that goat.

JEFFERSON

So do I. That's why I'll toast her with fennel and shallots at table tonight.

SALLY

Eston couldn't bear to see her eaten. He's a child.

JEFFERSON

He'll be excused.

SALLY

Eston learned to walk holding on to that doe. You'll break his heart. You can't kill her, Thomas. It would be cruel.

*JEFFERSON rises, approaching.*

JEFFERSON

I do apologize, Sally. I didn't mean to upset you.

SALLY

Think of Eston.

JEFFERSON

*(Chuckling.)*

Oh, I've seen how are together. The big eyes she makes at him. The way he makes her laugh... MMM-bahhhh!

*JEFFERSON nuzzles SALLY's neck.  
He kisses her and she responds.*

SALLY

Thank you, Thomas.

JEFFERSON

For what?

SALLY

For changing your mind and sparing Eston's goat.

JEFFERSON

Who said anything about changing my mind or my menu?

SALLY

But...

JEFFERSON

You jumped to a conclusion, Sally. I merely comforted you. I never acquiesced. I have a hankering for goat and I intend to serve Elias Moreland a savory stew. A savory Sylvi-en stew.

SALLY

No.

JEFFERSON

Sally...

SALLY

I won't allow it... Sir.

JEFFERSON

Mind how you talk to me.

SALLY

No, Thomas. Spare the goat. Serve something else instead.  
Serve turkey.

JEFFERSON

Turkey?! God no. Moreland would be apoplectic. If he and Franklin had chosen our national bird, baking a turkey would be an act of treason.

SALLY

Please... Sir, please--

JEFFERSON

--That's enough. Moreland will be here in four hours.

SALLY

*(Beat.)*

Do you recall what Elias Moreland said to me the last time he visited?

JEFFERSON

*(Sighs.)*

Yes. He called you a "Nubian princess".

SALLY

Did you put him up to it?

JEFFERSON

How can you think that?

SALLY

Well, you must've given him your we-don't-say-that-other-N-word-around-here-fella speech.

JEFFERSON

One of these days I'm going to forbid your insolence entirely.

SALLY

You know your problem, Thomas? You think that fraternizing with the livestock makes you a gentleman.

JEFFERSON

I'm appalled that you would say that about our relationship.

SALLY

Why not? You don't improve my legal standing by putting your hand down my bodice and your tongue up my skirt.

JEFFERSON

Don't be crude.

SALLY

Except when you want me that way.

JEFFERSON

Don't push me, Sally. Your presumption is going too far.

SALLY

I remember when you told me that going too far was our *raison d'être*.

JEFFERSON

I won't have you disrespecting me under my own roof! And in French! I should never have taken you to Paris.

SALLY

Don't treat my opinion as an insult to your authority.

JEFFERSON

What else could it be?

SALLY

Your bleating conscience, which suggests a name for your claim of gentlemanly entitlement over the lower species. Yes... let's call it--sub-humanism.

JEFFERSON

"Sub-humanism"--you don't know what you're talking about.

SALLY

Then let me explain. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of dog owners--those who treat a dog as a cur, and those who treat a dog as a pet. Guess which kind of attention a dog prefers.

(Beat.)

I'll tell you. The former, because a cur is certain of its treatment from day to day, and can build scars and calluses against it.

JEFFERSON

I do my best for you, Sally. You know that.

SALLY

But a pet. A pet knows that it must beg for its keep and present its belly to be rubbed whenever required. But no matter how well you treat a pet, each time its bowl is late is a reminder of how easily all its privileges can be taken away.

JEFFERSON

You have no such thing to fear from me.

SALLY

In the end, dog ownership is ownership. Fondness might prettify it, but affection is not alchemy.

JEFFERSON

You know me, Sally. You know what's in my heart.

SALLY

No, I can only guess what's in your heart from the evidence of your actions. Moreland is an out-and-out sub-humanist. He can be confronted head on. But you--you greet your pet slaves by name and tickle their children fondly. You give each of your pet families a goose for Christmas. You even ban the word "nigger" in your home, but you won't take steps against the injustice it represents in the outside world.

JEFFERSON

I had no idea you despised me so.

SALLY

You haven't been listening, have you? A privileged sub-humanist such as you hides his timidity behind a posture of victimhood.

JEFFERSON

What would you have me do?

SALLY

Well, start with Eston's goat.

JEFFERSON

*(With pent-up self-pity.)*

Fuck the goat! The goat's headed for the stew pot!

SALLY

Then give our children what you denied Sylvie--a new life, one with dignity.

JEFFERSON

I can't.

SALLY

You promised!

JEFFERSON

It's not that simple.

SALLY

No, it's not. The only thing that can defeat sub-humanism is self-doubt, which requires a rebellious heart.

JEFFERSON

Damn it, Sally! I have obligations. I'm in debt up to the rafters. I've proposed a university and I can't afford to alienate potential donors such as Elias Moreland!

SALLY

Not all obligations are created equal. At least tell your children who they are. Who you are.

JEFFERSON

My hands are tied.

SALLY

That's a self-centered, tactless thing to say, considering my station. And you're supposed to be a world-class diplomat.

JEFFERSON

Will you just let me do what I think best, starting with dinner.

SALLY

How can someone so masterful at statecraft be so inept at household politics? You insist on placing your own interests first. Fair enough. I'll do the same.

JEFFERSON

What's that supposed to mean?

SALLY

Are you prepared to force me to your bed? Because unless you embrace your family entire, you will not get me there otherwise.

*SALLY exits. Moments later,  
BEVERLY enters tentatively.*

JEFFERSON

*(Impatiently.)*

Yes, Beverly, what do you want?

BEVERLY

Nothing, Master Tom. Mama said you wanted to see me.

JEFFERSON

Of course she did... Come here, Beverly. Sit.

*BEVERLY sits awkwardly.*

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)

I was wrong. About Sylvie.

BEVERLY

Sir?

JEFFERSON

The goat. Eston's goat. I was wrong to tell you to kill it.

BEVERLY

Oh.

*(Long beat.)*

Is there anything more, Master Tom?

JEFFERSON

You must be wondering why I'm... confessing this.

BEVERLY

No, sir. I mean... I guess so.

JEFFERSON

Do you know who I am, Beverly?

BEVERLY

Of course, sir. You're the Master. You own this place and everyone who lives here.

JEFFERSON

I'm something more. To your mother. And to you.

BEVERLY

Sir?

JEFFERSON

I'm very fond of you, Beverly. Maybe you don't realize that, but I am. Fond of you and your siblings and your mother.

BEVERLY

Yes, sir, you treat us well. I've never complained.

JEFFERSON

Oh, I know that, Beverly. You've been loyal and hard-working.

*(Beat, calculating.)*

I'm sure that your... father, wherever he may be, is very proud of you.

*(Beat.)*

That's why I want to do something for you. Something unusual and certainly unexpected.

*(Beat.)*

Have you ever thought about what it might be like to live as a free man?

BEVERLY

I... I don't know, Master Tom. Like I said, you treat us good.

JEFFERSON

Well, I've decided... that one day in the future, I'm going to manumit you.

BEVERLY

Sir, I don't know what that means. Is it a good thing?

JEFFERSON

Yes, a very good thing. I'll be giving you your freedom then. And you'll have earned it by the time I die. Do you like that idea?



BEVERLY  
*(Dutiful but unsure.)*

Yes sir.

JEFFERSON  
 Now you mustn't say anything to anyone about this. It'll be our secret as long as I live.

BEVERLY  
 Excuse me, sir, but I wonder... I wonder how you can free me after you... you know... pass on.

*JEFFERSON holds up paper and quill.*

JEFFERSON  
 I'll prepare what's called a last will and testament. It's a sacred document in a court of law. I'll write instructions that you--and Harriet and Madison and Eston, too--that from that day forward you will all be forever free and independent.

BEVERLY  
*(Unconvinced.)*  
 Thank you, Master Tom... Can I tell my mama?

JEFFERSON  
 Yes, certainly. But no one else, not even your brothers and your sister.

BEVERLY  
 Oh, yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

JEFFERSON  
 Now here's a coin... take Eston into town for candy... Go on.

*BEVERLY heads for the door.*

JEFFERSON (CONT'D)  
 And Beverly.

BEVERLY  
 Sir?

JEFFERSON  
 Ask your mother to step in here, will you?

BEVERLY  
 Yes, Master Tom.

*BEVERLY exits. JEFFERSON counts five fingers, to no effect. Finally SALLY reappears, clutching her apron.*

JEFFERSON

There you are.

SALLY

Beverly said you wanted to see me, Master Thomas.

JEFFERSON

Well, yes, I wanted you to see that I made Beverly happy.

SALLY

So that I could tell you what a wonderful Master you are?

JEFFERSON

What's wrong with expecting a thank you?

SALLY

Nothing. As long as the gratitude doesn't exceed the size of the accomplishment.

JEFFERSON

You're very hard to please, you know that, Sally.

SALLY

I'm pleased. Not quite as pleased as Punch. Pleased as Judy is more like it.

JEFFERSON

Some day you'll understand me and my responsibilities.

SALLY

What did you tell Beverly about us?

JEFFERSON

I said that I would release the four children from bondage with my final instructions.

SALLY

That's it? "Your final instructions"? That's the best you could do for "the four children"?

JEFFERSON

Freedom is the ultimate gift, no matter how much patience it requires to obtain it.

SALLY

And you didn't explain to Beverly why you were going to some day be so generous to him and his sister and brothers?

JEFFERSON

That will come out in the reading of my will.

SALLY

Why wait? Why not follow the example of the man who declared a colony's freedom and simply release your human chattel?

JEFFERSON

You know why--for the good of all who depend on my estate. For my creditors' morale. For the university I want to build.

SALLY

For your own comfort and privilege.

JEFFERSON

It's for the best, Sally. Just appreciate that it will happen.

SALLY

You thought that I'd be satisfied with this arrangement? You're a foolish man, Thomas.

JEFFERSON

Yes, I am. That is why I require your continued love.

SALLY

As you wish--Master.

JEFFERSON

You're being unfair!

SALLY

That is true. I have been the embodiment of unfairness ever since I drew your eye as a child.

JEFFERSON

Damnit! I have to do this my way. For the larger goal.

SALLY

Some goal, whose grandiosity diminishes you.

JEFFERSON

*(Beat, as he composes himself.)*

We can discuss this later, when I deem it appropriate. In the meantime, there is still the matter of tonight's dinner. I've... decided not to serve the goat after all.

*SALLY reveals her bloody apron.*

SALLY

*(Measured, with nuanced force.)*

It's too late. She's already been slaughtered. A naked sub-human sacrifice--flayed, disjointed, and ready for the fire. Your offering will delight your guest of honor, who mistakes your cowardice for courtesy. Oh, he envies you the cursed property that is your good fortune. But every day hence I'll bleat in your ear a reminder of what that fortune costs you...

*(Mocking subservience.)*

... MMM-bahhhh.

*SALLY exits, leaving JEFFERSON brooding. End of play.*