

(The following is a one-act play based on an incident in the life of Abraham Lincoln. The incident may or may not be true. The point is I was tired when I wrote it.)

I

(Lincoln with boyish eagerness beckons George Jennings, his press secretary, into the room.)

Jennings: Mr. Lincoln, you sent for me?

Lincoln: Yes, Jennings. Come in. Sit down.

Jennings: Yes, Mr. President?

Lincoln: *(Unable to suppress a grin)* I want to discuss an idea.

Side Effects

Jennings: Of course, sir.

Lincoln: Next time we have a conference for the gentlemen of the press . . .

Jennings: Yessir . . . ?

Lincoln: When I take questions . . .

Jennings: Yes, Mr. President . . . ?

Lincoln: You raise your hand and ask me: Mr. President, how long do you think a man's legs should be?

Jennings: Pardon me?

Lincoln: You ask me: how long do I think a man's legs should be?

Jennings: May I ask why, sir?

Lincoln: Why? Because I have a very good answer.

Jennings: You do?

Lincoln: Long enough to reach the ground.

Jennings: Excuse me?

The Query

Lincoln: Long enough to reach the ground. That's the answer! Get it? How long do you think a man's legs should be? Long enough to reach the ground!

Jennings: I see.

Lincoln: You don't think it's funny?

Jennings: May I be frank, Mr. President?

Lincoln: (*Annoyed*) Well, I got a big laugh with it today.

Jennings: Really?

Lincoln: Absolutely. I was with the cabinet and some friends and a man asked it and I shot back that answer and the whole room broke up.

Jennings: May I ask, Mr. Lincoln, in what context did he ask it?

Lincoln: Pardon me?

Jennings: Were you discussing anatomy? Was the man a surgeon or a sculptor?

Lincoln: Why-er-no-I-I-don't think so. No. A simple farmer, I believe.

Jennings: Well, why did he want to know?

Lincoln: Well, I don't know. All I know is he was someone who had requested an audience with me urgently . . .

Jennings: (Concerned) I see.

Lincoln: What is it, Jennings, you look pale?

Jennings: It is a rather odd question.

Lincoln: Yes, but I got a laugh off it. It was a quick answer.

Jennings: No one's denying that, Mr. Lincoln.

Lincoln: A big laugh. The whole cabinet just broke up.

Jennings: And then did the man say anything?

Lincoln: He said thank you and left.

Jennings: You never asked why he wanted to know?

Lincoln: If you must know, I was too pleased with my answer. Long enough to reach the ground. It came out so fast. I didn't hesitate.

Jennings: I know, I know. It's just, well, this whole thing's got me worried.

II

(*Lincoln and Mary Todd in their bedroom, middle of the night. She in bed, Lincoln pacing nervously.*)

Mary: Come to bed, Abe. What's wrong?

Lincoln: That man today. The question. I can't get it out of my mind. Jennings's opened a can of worms.

Mary: Forget it, Abe.

Lincoln: I want to, Mary. Jesus, don't you think I want to? But those haunting eyes. Imploring. What could have prompted it? I need a drink.

Mary: No, Abe.

Lincoln: Yes.

Mary: I said, no! You've been jittery lately. It's this damn civil war.

Lincoln: It's not the war. I didn't respond to the human being. I was too preoccupied with getting the quick laugh. I allowed a complex issue to elude me just so I could get some chuckles from my cabinet. They hate me anyhow.

Side Effects

Mary: They love you, Abe.

Lincoln: I'm vain. Still, it was a fast comeback.

Mary: I agree. Your answer was clever. Long enough to reach his torso.

Lincoln: To reach the ground.

Mary: No, you said it the other way.

Lincoln: No. What's funny about that?

Mary: To me it's a lot funnier.

Lincoln: That's funnier?

Mary: Sure.

Lincoln: Mary, you don't know what you're talking about.

Mary: The image of legs rising to a torso . . .

Lincoln: Forget it! Can we forget it! Where's the bourbon?

Mary: (Withholding the bottle) No, Abe. You won't drink tonight! I won't allow it!

Lincoln: Mary, what's happened to us? We used to have such fun.

The Query

Mary: (Tenderly) Come here, Abe. There's a full moon tonight. Like the night we met.

Lincoln: No, Mary. The night we met there was a waning moon.

Mary: Full.

Lincoln: Waning.

Mary: Full.

Lincoln: I'll get the almanac.

Mary: Oh Christ, Abe, forget it!

Lincoln: I'm sorry.

Mary: Is it the question? The legs? Is it still that?

Lincoln: What did he mean?

III

(The cabin of Will Haines and his wife. Haines enters after a long ride. Alice puts down her quilting basket and runs to him.)

Alice: Well, did you ask him? Will he pardon Andrew?

Will: (Beside himself) Oh, Alice, I did such a stupid thing.

Side Effects

Alice: (Bitterly) What? Don't tell me he won't pardon our son?

Will: I didn't ask him.

Alice: You what!? You didn't ask him!?

Will: I don't know what came over me. There he was, the President of the United States, surrounded by important people. His cabinet, his friends. Then someone said, Mr. Lincoln, this man has ridden all day to speak to you. He has a question to ask. All the while I was riding I had gone over the question in my mind. "Mr. Lincoln, sir, our boy Andrew made a mistake. I realize how serious it is to fall asleep on guard duty, but executing such a young man seems so cruel. Mr. President, sir, couldn't you commute his sentence?"

Alice: That was the correct way to put it.

Will: But for some reason, with all those folks staring at me, when the President said, "Yes, what is your question?" I said, "Mr. Lincoln, how long do you think a man's legs should be?"

Alice: What?

Will: That's right. That was my question. Don't ask me why it came out. How long do you think a man's legs should be?

The Query

Alice: What kind of question is that?

Will: I'm telling you, I don't know.

Alice: His legs? How long?

Will: Oh, Alice, forgive me.

Alice: How long should a man's legs be? That's the stupidest question I've ever heard.

Will: I know, I know. Don't keep reminding me.

Alice: But why leg length? I mean, legs are not a subject that particularly interests you.

Will: I was fumbling for words. I forgot my original request. I could hear the clock ticking. I didn't want to appear tongue-tied.

Alice: Did Mr. Lincoln say anything? Did he answer?

Will: Yes. He said, long enough to reach the ground.

Alice: Long enough to reach the ground? What the hell does that mean?

Will: Who knows? But he got a big laugh. Of course, those guys are disposed toward reacting.

Side Effects

Alice: (Suddenly turns) Maybe you really didn't want Andrew pardoned.

Will: What?

Alice: Maybe down deep you don't want our son's sentence commuted. Maybe you're jealous of him.

Will: You're crazy. I-I. Me? Jealous?

Alice: Why not? He's stronger. He's smoother with pick and ax and hoe. He's got a feel for the soil like no man I've seen.

Will: Stop it! Stop it!

Alice: Let's face it, William, you're a lousy farmer.

Will: (Trembling with panic) Yes, I admit it! I hate farming! The seeds all look alike to me! And the soil! I can never tell it apart from dirt! You, from the east, with your fancy schools! Laughing at me. Sneering. I plant turnips and corn comes up! You think that doesn't hurt a man!?

Alice: If you would just fasten the seed packets to a little stick you'd know what you planted!

Will: I want to die! Everything is going black!

The Query

(Suddenly there is a knock at the door and when Alice opens it, it is none other than Abraham Lincoln. He is haggard and red-eyed.)

Lincoln: Mr. Haines?

Will: President Lincoln . . .

Lincoln: That question—

Will: I know, I know . . . how stupid of me! It was all I could think of, I was so nervous.

(Haines falls on his knees weeping. Lincoln also weeps.)

Lincoln: Then I was right. It was a non sequitur.

Will: Yes, yes . . . forgive me . . .

Lincoln: (Weeping unashamedly) I do, I do. Rise. Stand up. Your boy will be pardoned today. As will all boys who made a mistake be forgiven.

(Gathering the Haines family in his arms)

Your stupid question has caused me to reevaluate my life. For that I thank you and love you.

Alice: We did some reevaluating too, Abe. May we call you . . . ?

Side Effects

Lincoln: Yes, sure, why not? Do you guys have anything to eat? A man travels so many miles, at least offer him something.

(As they break out the bread and cheese the curtain falls.)