

Miro Gavran

George Washington's loves

January 14, 1800., noon

Mount Vernon, Virginia

Cast:

MARTHA WASHINGTON

George Washington's wife, 45 years old

SYLVIA CARVER

George Washington's mistress, 34 years old

(Before us is a tastefully furnished salon for receiving guests, with a spacious sofa and comfortable armchairs. Only one painting hangs on the wall, a picture of a forest. Martha Washington is seated on the sofa, dressed in black, her expression is grave, almost severe. She sits for a long time without moving, staring ahead. Sylvia Carver appears in the doorway. Sylvia is also in black. Martha is not looking in Sylvia's direction, but senses her presence in the room. Sylvia gives Martha a long, concentrated look, but does not dare to speak. It is as if she is putting off the beginning of the conversation.)

MARTHA: You've come?

SYLVIA: I've come.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: When I heard the sound of the coach, I thought it might be you. I told the maid to bring you in.

SYLVIA: Didn't you look out the window?

MARTHA: No.

SYLVIA: I thought I'd be getting here tomorrow.

MARTHA: I know, I was expecting you tomorrow.

SYLVIA: I was fortunate - we kept arriving at way stations just as the best horses were ready.

(Only then does Martha turn to Sylvia.)

MARTHA: Sit down.

SYLVIA: Thank you.

(Sylvia sits in the armchair. Martha stares at her mourning attire.)

MARTHA: Are you tired?

SYLVIA: Yes, quite.

MARTHA: Would you care for refreshment?

SYLVIA: No, thank you.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: In my letter I said you were welcome to stay a few days. Should I order the servants to bring in your things?

SYLVIA: I thank you for the invitation, but I've already written to General Hampton that I'll be visiting for several days.

MARTHA: It is another five-hour ride to General Hampton's estate from here.

SYLVIA: I know - I will be leaving as soon as we have talked. I hope to arrive there before nightfall.

MARTHA: I thought we'd have more time.

SYLVIA: We can talk for as long as you like.

(Long silence.)

MARTHA: You must have been surprised when you received my letter.

SYLVIA: Yes, I was... It arrived only three days after the news that George had died.

MARTHA: I'm glad you come.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: How did they take the news of his death in Philadelphia?

SYLVIA: Painfully. They shrouded the city in black banners. I heard a newspaper vendor that morning shouting: "George Washington is dead, first president of the United States of America" and I felt as if the words had nothing to do with George. I pretended not to understand what they meant, and the clamor of the crowds on the street. It was an hour later when I started to cry.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Philadelphia is George's most devoted city.

MARTHA: He was never fond of Philadelphia or any other city, all he cared for was Mount Vernon - this tiresome estate.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: You were by his beside when he died?

MARTHA: I was.

SYLVIA: His last words...?

MARTHA: There were no last words. He had no strength for last words, farewell speeches or messages. He died... in an ordinary way, in pain.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: I hadn't seen him for three years.

MARTHA: Yes, three years ago George withdrew from politics, left Philadelphia and we came here.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: You must have thought it odd that George decided to step down, that he left public life and went to live a solitary life on his estate.

SYLVIA: I didn't think it odd.

MARTHA: It was.

SYLVIA: No, truly it wasn't.

MARTHA: But - he left you. Without explanation he abandoned his public mistress and decided to live with me to the end.

SYLVIA: I don't like the word "mistress" - it's a harsh word.

MARTHA: But that's what you were to him.

SYLVIA: All the same - it's still a harsh word.

MARTHA: I was his wife. You know, the word "wife" never seemed harsh to me.

(They gaze openly at each other.)

SYLVIA: Why did you want me to come to you?

MARTHA: So we could talk.

SYLVIA: But we hardly know each other. During the eight years that you were with George in Philadelphia we only ran into each other at a few receptions. And only spoke to each other twice - the first time when we met, and afterwards when you said you'd scratch my eyes out if I continued to be your husband's mistress. That was three months before your departure.

MARTHA: Two months before our departure.

SYLVIA: Perhaps it was two.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: And now you invite me here to talk with you.

MARTHA: George is dead.

SYLVIA: I would have preferred an invitation while he was still alive.

MARTHA: I know - that is why I have invited you now.

SYLVIA: And what can we talk about?

MARTHA: About him.

SYLVIA: Too late. He's gone.

MARTHA: So much of it is still confused, foggy.

SYLVIA; It only seems so.

MARTHA: Everything that happened between you and him - all of it is, after all, my business as well.

SYLVIA: Why now?

MARTHA: Don't you think that as his wife, at least now that he is gone, I deserve some sort of explanation?

SYLVIA: And I am supposed to provide this "explanation"?

MARTHA: That's right, you.

SYLVIA: Haven't you been able to hear from George over these last three years all the "explanations" that interest you?

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Well?

MARTHA: We never spoke of you.

SYLVIA: But you asked him often.

MARTHA: ... I did. In vain.

SYLVIA: So you don't know the whole story.

MARTHA: What story?

SYLVIA: Oh, nothing, it is meaningless now anyway.

MARTHA: What are you talking about?

SYLVIA: Nothing.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: You're in mourning.

SYLVIA: As you can see.

MARTHA: With what right?

SYLVIA: I loved him.

MARTHA: That gives you no right to wear widow's weeds.

SYLVIA: I, on the other hand, feel that only that gives me every right.

MARTHA: Don't you feel awkward here before me, before his lawful wedded wife?

SYLVIA: No. I assume that you loved him as well, and that you can understand it.

(They stare long and hard at each other. Neither woman looks away.)

MARTHA: Did you ever stop and think in those eight long years how painful it all was for me... what went on between you two?

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Do you have any idea how a woman feels when she learns that her husband no longer belongs to her, that he is touching another woman's skin

with his fingers, that he is speaking words to someone else that are only spoken to a beloved, that he confiding in someone else his secrets, fears, wishes... while he is growing further and further away from her.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: You inflicted great pain on me, great pain. At night I'd tremble at the thought that I'd lose him forever, that he'd belong to you... When I heard that he had a mistress, that he had you, I suddenly began to notice how people looked at me strangely. They didn't know whether I knew what they knew, what everyone in Philadelphia knew. And especially my enemies and their wives - I saw so much joy in their eyes at that time. I was the First Lady of the Union and yet I felt like the most miserable of beggars.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Has anyone ever deceived you, cheated you, betrayed you, someone you loved?

SYLVIA: No, never.

MARTHA: That is what I thought. People like you...

SYLVIA: Go ahead and say it.

MARTHA: People like you cannot be abandoned because people like you never fully give their hearts.

SYLVIA: Did you invite me to your home to insult me? I travelled such a long way in the hope of talking to you about him, about the man we loved.

MARTHA: I didn't want to hurt you.

SYLVIA: I wouldn't say so. Your words just then were nothing short of a call for some pointless settling of accounts that has no meaning, which I really don't care for.

(Long silence.)

MARTHA: Forgive me. When I wrote you the letter it was right after the funeral. Everyone around me was talking about him, everyone expressed their condolences and sorrow, they all spoke of him, but said nothing important. He never opened his heart to anyone. People loved him, but he never confided in anyone. Remember how closed and secretive he was. After his death I wanted to talk to someone about him, about the things that open up a person's soul. I suddenly realized that you were the one person in the world with whom I could talk about what he was really like. I jotted off the letter to you in haste, sent it immediately - and the next day I began to wonder if maybe I shouldn't have, that I had acted rashly and that there was no point. And especially when it occurred to me what people might think when they saw that you'd been to see me.

SYLVIA: Is what other people think so important to you?

MARTHA: That is how I was brought up. I know that women like yourself pay no attention to such things.

SYLVIA: I was brought up to feel that what I thought was all that was important.

MARTHA: How fortunate.

SYLVIA: That depends.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: I think I know why you invited me. Everyone in Philadelphia talked about the death of the great military leader who had freed the country, everyone talked about the first respected president - but no-one was talking about George. The way they spoke of him sounded to me at times as if they were talking about a stranger, a legend, a monument. George was, after all, an ordinary man, such an ordinary and good man.

MARTHA: You loved him?

SYLVIA: Does that matter now?

MARTHA: It does to me.

SYLVIA: Would it make you feel better to hear that I'd loved him, or that I didn't love him?

MARTHA: What a ridiculous question.

SYLVIA: Answer me.

MARTHA: I think I'd feel better if you told me you didn't love him.

SYLVIA: Fine. I didn't love him.

MARTHA: That's what I thought. How could you bear to be the mistress of someone you did not love?

SYLVIA: Simple.

MARTHA: That's what I thought.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I remember when he went off with you to White Lake - I remained at home, and he was there with you.

SYLVIA: That was a hunt. And we were not alone - there were thirty other people from Philadelphia with us.

MARTHA: So much the worse. All the more witnesses to your adventure. The hunt lasted ten days, and it seemed to me like ten years. Right before the hunt I quarreled with him and didn't want him to leave the house, I demanded that he stay home from the hunt. - That was the first time that he refused to do something that I asked... And the real trouble started when you got back. The first few days all the women who had been with you on the hunt contacted me and "confidentially" told me all about the time you'd had, who'd said what in your company, they told me that you never left his side for a moment, and that every evening after dinner, in front of everyone, you retired with George to his chambers. They told me it all with delight - those vixens. They looked me in the eyes while they spoke about how my husband was deceiving me. They sought signs of my pain and defeat.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Do you remember those days spent by White Lake?

SYLVIA: I'll remember them for the rest of my life.

MARTHA: Were you happy there?

SYLVIA: Well, one could call it that.

MARTHA: Did you even once stop to think of me while you were at White Lake?

SYLVIA: Do you want an honest answer?

MARTHA: ... Only an honest one.

SYLVIA: Never once.

MARTHA: Never once?

SYLVIA: No. - the whole time I thought only of George. I saw no one but him. None of the people who were with us, not the deer we hunted, nor what the weather was like, I saw nothing - believe me, I can no longer remember whether it was sunny, cloudy, overcast, clear. All that I remember is his face.

MARTHA: What did you speak of then?

SYLVIA: We didn't talk much.

MARTHA: And you truly never thought of me once?

SYLVIA: Truly.

MARTHA: Don't you feel uncomfortable to admit that?

SYLVIA: No.

MARTHA: I'd like to see your soul.

SYLVIA: Nothing special.

MARTHA: I wouldn't say so. So arrogant, such indifference while inflicting pain on someone else, I've never seen such coldness in a woman. I can't imagine how he could be with you. Now it is a stranger to me than it was when I only knew you slightly.

SYLVIA: Do you hate me?

MARTHA: ...I always have. No-one has hurt me so deeply. At one moment you walked into our lives, an intruder. You threatened to destroy in a single day everything I had built with George for years. I knew that my happiness and my life hung on your charming smile, and that one flirtatious gesture of your shameless hand was enough to destroy our bond, to destroy my world. I asked myself what kind of a woman is this who gives herself the right to destroy someone else's happiness. How do such women sleep, what do women dream who find it so easy to devastate someone else's happiness and humiliate them with their smiles. I asked myself is there anything in this world that you hold sacred, and if there is nothing, then how can you live at all. Can someone else's unhappiness be the basis of a person's life?

SYLVIA: Isn't that hatred speaking out from you, haven't the basest thoughts formed now in your mind?

MARTHA: They have. But provoked by your evil. I admit it: I wished so many times during those days that you would cease to exist, vanish, not die but merely vanish.

SYLVIA: And in the end it came true.

MARTHA: Yes, in the end.

SYLVIA: You spent the last three years without me, alone, here on this lovely estate. Wasn't he yours alone, weren't you happy?

MARTHA: I was. But at what a price. We had to leave Philadelphia and retire from public life, exchange life in the largest American city for life on a farm, far from people, the bustle, from everything. Here in this desert he was mine alone. But only a hermit can be happy here.

SYLVIA: George was something of a hermit.

MARTHA: Yes, he always loved life on the farm, but I never did.

SYLVIA: It rarely happens that a person gets everything from life.

MARTHA: An honest person never does.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Tell me, when you were together, what did you speak of?

SYLVIA: Everything.

MARTHA: But what did you talk of most?

SYLVIA: I can't possibly remember now.

MARTHA: He probably spoke of things with you that he didn't talk about with me.

SYLVIA: And vice versa.

MARTHA: Yes.

SYLVIA: I don't know what interests you.

MARTHA: Did he ever speak to you of... me?

SYLVIA: Of you?

MARTHA: Yes.

SYLVIA: He did.

MARTHA: What?!

SYLVIA: Often.

MARTHA: Often?!

(Silence.)

MARTHA: In what way?

SYLVIA: Well, you know how men talk with their mistresses about their wives.

MARTHA: I wouldn't know. I've never been anyone's mistress. Tell me.

SYLVIA: He tried to make excuses, for me and for him. He said that he really didn't love you any more, that everything he felt for you in the beginning was gone. He said that he felt lonely in your embrace, that your touch no longer meant anything. Once he said: "When I touch Martha's hand, it is as if I am touching a table or the wall, I feel matter under my fingers and nothing else."

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Is that exactly what he said?

SYLVIA: Almost to the letter.

MARTHA: You mean to say that at those moments he felt nothing for me.

SYLVIA: That is what he said. Towards you he felt only duty, obligation. He felt his duty as a burden.

MARTHA: But he was even more tender toward me then than he had ever been before.

SYLVIA: Out of a sense of duty.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: There's something heavy in the air. As if it will rain.

SYLVIA: Yes, it's cloudy.

MARTHA: There has been too much rain this year. If it keeps up, the crops will suffer.

SYLVIA: Who will be looking after the estate now?

MARTHA: I'm not sure. We have two good foremen, they know their work well, but I am afraid that if I give one of them the senior position, the other will be insulted, and he'll quit out of vanity.

SYLVIA: Do you know anything about the work that has to be done?

MARTHA: Not very much. George saw to everything himself.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I must admit - you've surprised me.

SYLVIA: Why?

MARTHA: I had thought that our meeting would be different. I thought that you'd be different.

SYLVIA: In what way?

MARTHA: Well, I'd assumed that you would at least apologize... for everything.

SYLVIA: You expected my repentance?

MARTHA: If not your repentance, at least some sign of discomfort. It surprises me that you can look me straight in the eyes without the slightest shame.

SYLVIA: And you thought that I would be staring at the floor all this time.

MARTHA: You even mock me. Now, now when he is gone. I thought that you'd find at least enough decency to tell me that you're sorry for everything that's happened.

SYLVIA: But I'm not sorry, for anything.

MARTHA: And you can say so with pride.

(They look directly at one another.)

MARTHA: Everything has been going downhill for you these last three years.

SYLVIA: I hadn't noticed.

MARTHA: I heard you were courted by Governor Johanson, and soon afterwards by Mr. Fielding, the ship builder. You turned them both down, yet both of them are such excellent gentlemen.

SYLVIA: And married.

MARTHA: That didn't bother you earlier.

SYLVIA: What do you mean by that?

MARTHA: Isn't Governor Johanson good enough for you? He's a smart man, well-educated, handsome, with a high-ranking position. I've heard that he set fire to his house out of despair when you turned him down.

SYLVIA: Nonsense. It is true that he smashed a lantern in a fit of pique, but he didn't mean to start a fire.

MARTHA: So it is true.

SYLVIA: People tend to stretch such things out of proportion.

MARTHA: Do you want me to tell you why you turned down Governor Johanson and Mr. Fielding?

SYLVIA: How would you know?

MARTHA: You turned them down because you hoped George would come back to you.

SYLVIA: That is not true.

MARTHA: Oh, yes it is.

SYLVIA: I no longer care about Washington.

MARTHA: You're lying. You turned down the Governor and the ship-owner because you were used to being mistress to the President of the United States. You are so vain and so greedy for honour that no man could measure up to the President.

SYLVIA: You are judging me by yourself. I turned them down because they meant nothing to me.

MARTHA: No, my sweet, you turned them down because you refused to come down a step.

SYLVIA: Unlike you, I do not perceive life as a staircase.

MARTHA: You'd rather stay the President's past mistress than be the Governor's, or that shipbuilder's mistress today.

SYLVIA: You aren't listening. Evidently you know a good deal about what has happened to me these last three years.

MARTHA: What is so strange about that? The two of us have always been like sisters. We've known everything there was to know about each other. Whatever one did affected the other, because in the eyes of everyone else the two of us were joined by an inseverable bond. We certainly wanted all the best for each other. Our fates have been interwoven in a crushing embrace. How can I be indifferent to my sister? Your actions have dictated my happiness.

SYLVIA: This may have been true for the years when I was George's mistress, but your prying to my life over the last three years is uncalled for.

MARTHA: I'd hardly say so. We have always been joined by fate.

SYLVIA: You were afraid George would come back to me.

MARHA: I was not.

SYLVIA: Oh, yes you were. He was yours, and yet he wasn't. You were never fully sure of yourself, or of him.

MARTHA: Oh, yes I was.

SYLVIA: You're lying. Every single day you worried that he might harness the horses to the carriage and go off to Philadelphia. And that he would be mine once more. You were never at ease for a single moment. Your happiness was so uncertain, so frail.

MARTHA: That is not true. I knew that George was mine to the end.

SYLVIA: You knew!? How could you have known that?

MARTHA: He told me repeatedly that you meant nothing to him any more, that I was his everything. He even said that he was sorry for having gotten involved with you in the first place, that the two of us should forget it. He said that he would be mine and mine alone, forever.

SYLVIA: And you didn't believe a word he said.

MARTHA: Yes, I did.

SYLVIA: You did not. Those little suspicions ate away at your heart while you listened to his words of affection, suspicions that had taken root there the day you first learned that George had a mistress. Nagging suspicion coloured each and every tender word that George spoke. The warmer his words, the less you believed them. Whenever he said, "Martha, I am yours forever more", cold shivers would run up and down your spine, and instead of enjoying the ringing words, you'd wonder anxiously what he was hiding with his insistence that he was forever yours? Why did he bring up something that was perfectly obvious?

MARTHA: But I did believe him in the months before he died.

SYLVIA: Martha, my dear, after a man has betrayed his wife she no longer knows words such as faith, trust, truth and sincerity. These words die forever in her, they can never appear in the same shining apparel, pure as a child's delight, ever again. Once the trust of a man or a woman is lost once, it is lost forever.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: You tell me that I was not happy with him, but I really was happy with George. There is only one truth: he chose me and abandoned you.

SYLVIA: You stand before me unmasked, vulnerable, miserable. I see into the most cloistered corners of your soul, and I know what is there. You can't hide anything from me. You are no more than an ordinary, deceived wife whose life has become an open, festering wound never to heal. You are not a strong person and you never have been. Instead you are a petty woman, unable to abide defeat. Women like you do not know how to lose. When you do lose, you become vulnerable for the rest of your lives. I'll tell you something important. George's affair with me was not difficult for you because you lost his love, but because you lost. You are shallow. You don't deserve pity as the woman deceived, but because you see everything only in terms of victory or defeat, even love.

MARTHA: You are the one who experienced defeat in the end. You are the one who was thwarted in your ghastly visions of love as a struggle ending in either victory or defeat. I know all about what has happened to you over the last three years. I know the despair you felt after George left. It was a terrible blow. You stand here before me unmasked and miserable, and in your heart of hearts I can see that you are ruled by the logic of an ordinary provincial mistress whose life finds its meaning in being third, third or nothing. Women like you value yourselves by how destructive you can be. The greater the evil you can inflict, the more you are worth. "Mistress to the President of the United States" - what a ring that had in your ears - you heartless doll. If you were a woman of flesh and blood with sincere feelings - you probably would have fallen in love with George's doorman, his butler, his adviser. Why didn't you fall in love with his adviser?

SYLVIA: I didn't like him. Too serious.

MARTHA: Too insignificant.

SYLVIA: Then why didn't you fall in love with the adviser?

MARTHA: I was at George Washington's side when no-one had any idea what he would become. And don't you forget it. Without me he would never have become president. He would never have done it without my support.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I know that you didn't love him, but still you were his mistress for years. I could never understand that.

SYLVIA: What?

MARTHA: How does a woman feel when she makes love to a man she doesn't love? What does she say to him? What does he say to her? Do they look each other in the eyes while they make love? Did you look George in the eyes while the two of you made love?

SYLVIA: Sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't.

MARTHA: When didn't you?

SYLVIA: When the lights were off.

MARTHA: And, what did you say to him?

SYLVIA: What did I say to him?

MARTHA: Yes, what did you say to him?

SYLVIA: I told him not to hurry.

MARTHA: But he never hurried. He never hurried with me.

SYLVIA (*confused*): Really?

MARTHA: Really.

(*Silence.*)

MARTHA: Forgive my curiosity, but I am interested in how a woman feels when she sleeps with a man she doesn't love. Isn't there just a touch of awkwardness, disgust perhaps?

SYLVIA: Not a trace.

MARTHA: I assume that you never felt pleasure. So many years with the same lover, no emotion, no love. Wasn't it automatic? A little monotonous?

(*Long silence.*)

SYLVIA: You know, I've been curious all these years, too. What did you feel for George when he made love to you? What did you say to him? What did he say to you?

MARTHA: Do you really want to know?

SYLVIA: I really do. What did you feel?

MARTHA: I don't know how to talk about it. It is so intimate I have never told anyone what I felt while I was making love with George.

SYLVIA: We have long been exposed to one another. And we know every one of George's features by heart. I am the only woman in the world you can tell these things to without embarrassment. So, what was it like between the two of you?

(Silence.)

MARTHA: He was always tender, and... we didn't talk much... I felt very close to him and I think that he always thought only of me... while we made love... If you know what I mean. And sometimes... in the middle... he would sob uncontrollably. He'd sob like a baby, out of joy. When it was over... he'd light a cigar. Sometimes he'd sip some whiskey and... well...

SYLVIA: Tell me. Tell me more.

MARTHA: I asked you first but you wouldn't say.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Tell me what it's like to make love to a man you don't love.

SYLVIA: No.

MARTHA: Why not?

SYLVIA: I know you are dying to find out how George and I made love, but you'll never know.

MARTHA: I told you.

SYLVIA: Whose fault is that? It's too late to take it back.

MARTHA: Good Lord, what sort of woman are you. What granite you're carved from. Without honesty, without shame, without feelings.

SYLVIA: Without feelings?

MARTHA: Yes, without feelings.

SYLVIA: Go ahead and say whatever is in your heart. Your words mean nothing to me one way or the other.

MARTHA: I know. Women like you can not even be insulted. You are all without feelings.

SYLVIA: Who do you mean, you all.

MARTHA: Women of your kind.

SYLVIA: What kind?

MARTHA: Mistresses. Or perhaps there is more fitting expression.

SYLVIA: Say it.

MARTHA: Harlots.

SYLVIA: So, in your opinion, I am...

MARTHA: Yes, you are a harlot.

SYLVIA: And you are a faithful, honest wife who always loved her husband. Deserving of respect and sympathy.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I can't imagine why George could have anything to do with such an insolent, emotionless woman. I understand that a man can have a mistress. But you? George's choice is so odd. You couldn't deserve his love in any way. There is not a trace of gentility or goodness in your spirit.

SYLVIA: And you think that you deserved his love?

MARTHA: Yes. With my whole being.

SYLVIA: Do you think that you were always deserving of his love?

MARTHA: I do.

SYLVIA: And that no one deserved it as much as you did?

MARTHA: No-one.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Now, when George is gone, you still can't forgive him for having a mistress?

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Even now that he's dead you haven't forgiven him.

MARTHA: ... I haven't. It was the betrayal I could not condone. Especially not now when I see what the women be deceived me with is like.

SYLVIA: Don't you think you might try and find a way to justify, to forgive a dead man.

MARTHA: No, never.

SYLVIA: You feel that he hurt you, that he shamed you by the very fact that he was with me.

MARTHA: Precisely.

SYLVIA: Doesn't it occur to you that you may have hurt and shamed him before he decided to do the same to you.

MARTHA: I never deceived him with another man.

SYLVIA: There are other ways to deceive and betray. There are so many ways a woman can hurt her husband, cause him pain and torment him.

MARTHA: I was always good to George.

SYLVIA: I wouldn't say so.

MARTHA: What gives you the right to speak to me like that?

SYLVIA: Because I know almost everything there is to know about you.

MARTHA: You are rude and brazen.

SYLVIA: Those are not the words of a lady.

MARTHA: You are insolent. Aren't you ashamed to look me in the eyes?

(They watch each other in tense silence.)

SYLVIA: And you won't even forgive him when he's dead.

MARTHA: I haven't and I won't, ever. Because I stayed constant to the end, and he did not. He betrayed me.

SYLVIA: He didn't betray you.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: What do you mean?

SYLVIA: He never betrayed you with me.

MARTHA: What are you trying to say?

SYLVIA: Precisely what I said.

MARTHA: I don't understand you!

SYLVIA: He never slept with me.

MARTHA: And you think I'll believe you?

SYLVIA: He never even kissed me.

(Long silence.)

MARTHA: You're joking?

SYLVIA: No.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: You haven't the right to say anything bad about George. Just as you haven't the right to say anything good about yourself.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Wait, do you mean he really, with you never...

SYLVIA: Is that so important to you?

MARTHA: Of course it is.

SYLVIA: Never.

MARTHA: I don't believe you.

(They look straight at each other.)

SYLVIA: The only person in this world that George ever loved was you.

(Silence)

SYLVIA: He loved only you.

MARTHA: Do you think so?

SYLVIA: I know... He told me. So many times.

MARTHA: Are you making fun of me?

SYLVIA: Unfortunately, I am not.

MARTHA: Then how could it possible be that he and you never...

SYLVIA: I thought that George told you our little secret. When I received your message I was certain that you knew the whole story, and that you were inviting me to talk about him as a friend.

MARTHA: What secret are you referring to?

SYLVIA: I will tell you - though you don't deserve it.

(Silence. Sylvia rubs her forehead wearily as if it is hard for her to speak.)

SYLVIA: Thirteen years ago, not long after you arrived with George in Philadelphia, my father's business suddenly went downhill. He lost a large shipment of goods in Yorktown - a well organized robbery. Father fell seriously ill. He had gone much further into debt than his honor allowed. Almost no-one knew of the situation our family was in. Almost no one, except your George.

MARTHA: Why are you telling me this?

SYLVIA: One day George came up to me at a ball and offered me a good job. He proposed a very reasonable monthly wage - so reasonable that I could pay off my family's debts with it.

MARTHA: What sort of employment was he suggesting?

SYLVIA: The funniest sort - something no-one had ever suggested in the history of the world.

MARTHA: What was it he spoke to you of?

SYLVIA: Mostly of himself. He said that he loved his wife, that you were the meaning of his life. From the moment he woke up in the morning until he went to bed at night he thought of nothing but you. And he said that he felt he was losing you more each day, that you were no longer tender to him, that you were harder and harder - and that after serious thought he had realized that there was only one way to win back your love and attention.

MARTHA: What was that?

SYLVIA: To find the mistress. He counted on your jealousy and hurt pride... And then he told me that he wasn't the kind of man who could really deceive you. He constantly repeated that he loved you more than anything in the world, and that you were the only woman he wanted, that his understanding of love was that a man should never touch another woman, that love was something sacred that must never be defiled by anything, that it was light that must never be in shadow. - You surely remember how fond George was of fancy phrases and large words.

MARTHA: And, then what happened?

SYLVIA: Then he said that I must understand that he couldn't have a mistress, and yet he desperately needed a mistress if he wanted to save your love.

MARTHA: A rather hopeless situation.

SYLVIA: George found hope. He told me openly that my family was choking in debts and that he was prepared to pay me a generous sum every month if I would agree to play the role of his mistress in public.

MARTHA: And you?

SYLVIA: I was surprised. George noticed my confusion and immediately swore that he would never for a moment abuse his position if I were to agree to

this unusual compact. He promised that he would never kiss or touch me. He said that it was enough for me to appear with him in public, to withdraw with him to his chambers from time to time, that I would travel with him occasionally.

MARTHA: And you agreed?

SYLVIA: Not at once. The next day. I had no choice, I had to save my family, and I knew that I would always have a clean conscience. My own feelings were always much more important to me than what others thought of me.

(A heavy long silence. Martha's face shows astonishment. As she is engrossed in mulling over the story she has just heard.)

MARTHA: You mean... he never...

SYLVIA: Never.

MARTHA: Then what was it all for?

SYLVIA: He loved you.

MARTHA: And I loved him.

SYLVIA: Then, during the first year of your stay in Philadelphia, you didn't love him.

MARTHA: I think I did.

SYLVIA: At that time George felt that everything else was more important to you than he was. He had just become president and you threw yourself heart and soul into the receptions, the protocol, politics, you were thrilled at being the First Lady of the United States of America and you neglected George.

MARTHA: But I helped him in his work.

SYLVIA: Don't forget that George never wanted to be a politician. He was proud of being a soldier, a great military leader, he loved working the land, but politics always disgusted him.

MARTHA: That is what he used to say.

SYLVIA: That is how he felt. And he hated Philadelphia. He never enjoyed city life. He never liked the receptions, the meetings, the diplomatic talks.

MARTHA: I know.

SYLVIA: And yet you pretended not to know. You urged him to become president because you were greedy for glory, and hungry for social life, an audience, publicity.

MARTHA: It was necessary at the time.

SYLVIA: It was not necessary. You forced him into it. You knew that he was unhappy but you didn't care.

MARTHA: How dare you speak to me like this.

SYLVIA: At that time George was living in a city he didn't like, doing a job he didn't like, and feeling that his wife was growing stranger and stranger, and that she felt nothing more for him. He was unhappy, terribly unhappy. And then he thought of the game with the false mistress, he thought up a little trick with which he might win over his wife once more.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: But at first it had the opposite effect. When you heard that he was "deceiving" you with me, you grew even colder towards him, even harder. And the more he worked at breaking through the barrier of your indifference, the more he lost you.

MARTHA: I was hurt by his behavior - I had to make him know.

SYLVIA: Yet he experienced it as the end of your love.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: He begged you to let him resign and return to his estate.

MARTHA: I wouldn't hear of it. I thought that it would be interpreted by everyone else as my escape, my defeat.

SYLVIA: You cared more about the receptions and pomp than about George.

MARTHA: That is not true.

SYLVIA: It is true... Only after eight long years did you agree to retreat from political life. Inside you then the desire to have George all to yourself defeated the desire to be an important and influential woman who was shaping the politics of a great land.

(Long silence.)

MARTHA: And what if you've made all this up?

SYLVIA: Unfortunately, I have not.

MARTHA: That story of the "compact", the "false mistress" - I don't believe a word of it.

SYLVIA: Good Lord, you're pitiful - now you'd rather George had a mistress, than to have to face just how cold and insensitive you really were, my dear.

MARTHA: Don't insult me, you little cheat, you've thought all this up to hurt me all the more.

SYLVIA: I have thought up nothing.

MARTHA: You have, too.

SYLVIA: I have not. And I have the proof.

(Sylvia pulls a letter out of her sleeve.)

MARTHA: What is that?

SYLVIA: A letter. George's last letter to me. He sent it to me right before you left Philadelphia. Do you want me to read it to you.

MARTHA: ... Read it.

(Sylvia opens the letter and begins to read.)

SYLVIA: "My honored friend, the day has finally come when we can cancel our unusual compact. I am overjoyed, because I will finally be leaving politics and Philadelphia behind and going off with my beloved wife to live on the farm at Mount Vernon. But grieve not, as a token of my gratitude for the happy outcome I offer you six month's remuneration, which will allow you to meet the final payments on your family debt. My wife Martha has at last agreed that I will not run a third time for president, and I believe that I have earned her love and inclinations once again. I am most sincerely grateful to you for acquiescing to play my mistress all these years, for which evil tongues have lashed you, unfairly. In all my happiness allow me, dear Sylvia, to remember to wish you equal happiness. I remain to my dying day in your debt. With my deep respect, George Washington".

(Sylvia reads the letter. A long, painful silence ensues. We hear the women breathing and the lingering words resound in their hearts as if George himself had spoken them.)

MARTHA: May I see the letter?

(Sylvia nods and hands her the letter. Martha takes it.)

MARTHA: Why it really is his handwriting.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I don't know what to say, what to think. It is so odd that George loved me all the time, while I even hated him at moments because of a deception that didn't even exist.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: And I hated you, Sylvia. I envied you, because I thought that he was young and happy with you. I couldn't imagine that it was all a lie, an ordinary lie.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Forgive me. Today I've said harsh words to you. Without cause.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I think that after this the two of us just might be... friends.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: We cannot.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: George was a wonderful man. But he loved the wrong woman. A woman who didn't deserve him. That happens in life - that the Firmament brings the most refined soul together with a chunk of ice. The two of you were always different in every respect. He was moderate, modest - you were all in grand gestures, he hated politics while for you politics was a passion, he loved life on the farm - while you preferred balls and receptions, he always thought unselfishly of your happiness - while you almost never thought of his. You were always selfish. Forgive me, but I cannot be your friend.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: I invited you here because I thought that the two of us might...

SYLVIA: You invited me because you wanted to exult in your final triumph. George was yours in the end, and you wanted to see the woman you had beaten.

MARTHA: But I thought that you'd been lovers then, I thought that you loved him. Now, after this turn of events, everything has changed.

SYLVIA: Nothing has changed. We are true rivals, because: I will admit that I loved him as well.

MARTHA: You loved him!?!

SYLVIA: Yes.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: Now I,m completely confused.

SYLVIA: The first two years of our false love I felt nothing for him. My role as his mistress became a job, in time, like anything else. But I was in George's company frequently during those two years, and bit by bit he won me over with his calmness, steadiness, goodness. George was a man who understood

people, selfless, modest, endlessly patient. He was different from all the men I've known. When near him I always felt serenity, gentleness. Life seemed much more simple than it really is. And... I fell in love with him.

(Silence.)

MARTHA: What did he say when you told him?

SYLVIA: I never told him.

MARTHA: Never? Really?

SYLVIA: Never.

MARTHA: But, why?

SYLVIA: He had spoken so openly to me about you that there was no point. He adored you with his entire, boyish heart.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: I envied you. I was jealous of you, jealous to the point of madness. George spoke of you, he talked and talked, and I would listen and nod without responding, my throat dry from jealousy, from the sorrow of it that I was not in your place. George never learned of my feelings, he never contemplated the tumult in my soul - though he understood people better than anyone did, and knew all my sorrow and joy, even when I kept it hidden inside. It never once struck him that I might love him.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: He loved only you.

MARTHA: I was his wife.

SYLVIA: Unfortunately.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Do you know what it means to love someone for nine years with all your heart, and never to experience a single moment of tenderness. Not even a kiss... When you left Philadelphia I died of yearning for him. I hoped that he would write, at least once by letter from distant Mount Vernon, but I waited in vain, in vain.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: Eleven years have passed. George is gone. My life is an utter failure. For all other men I am no more than George Washington's mistress - and one can never fall in love with someone else's mistress.

MARTHA: Why must you see things that way?

SYLVIA: Why?! - Even you called me a harlot.

(Silence.)

SYLVIA: It was hardest to bear on that hunting trip at White Lake. I slept in his chambers - he was in the room next to mine. Everyone thought we were in each other's arms. I wanted him with all my body and soul. He was so close, yet so very far. I desired his touch, kiss, caress - and at those moments he was thinking of you, only you. You were miles away, but so warmly snug in his heart. I envied you. I felt miserable, nothing.

(Long silence.)

SYLVIA: George never loved me. I was merely a toy that helped you renew your love for each other.

(Long silence.)

SYLVIA: Excuse me, I must be going.

MARTHA: If you wish you may stay a few days here with me.

SYLVIA: No, thank you. I fear that it would only be harder for you and me. Though, I must admit that if I had the strength I would love to talk for days to you about George. And now: farewell.

MARTHA: Farewell.

(Sylvia moves towards the door.)

MARTHA: Sylvia!

(Sylvia hesitates.)

MARTHA: There is something terribly important I must tell you.

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SYLVIA: Tell me.

MARTHA: Before he died, on his death bed, George's last words... were...

SYLVIA: Tell me.

MARTHA: Your name.

THE END

NOTE:

Historians may disagree with me on many points, perhaps they will claim that Washington did not have one but many mistresses, or they'll say that he had only one named not Sylvia, but Jenny, or they'll claim that his wife was not 45 years old at the time of his death, they'll say that I have changed historical truth.

In reply to all possible complaints, I can explain that George Washington came to me in a dream between 19th and 20th of January, 1988, and told me the story that I have described in the play, and added: "Don't believe historical sources when you are writing a play about love and loneliness, describe the truth of the human heart and not the truth of historical fact". So this play is the most truthful recording of that dream. George admitted that his ghost was there at Mount Vernon when his wife Martha and mistress Sylvia met, and that he felt badly at certain moments.