

The Redundant George Washington

by Lynne Agress

It was a cold and windy December twenty-fifth, so windy that no boats were allowed to cross the Delaware. Although the temperature was below freezing, Ben Abbott was perspiring in his George Washington costume. When he'd first begun participating in the Revolutionary Reenactment more than 30 years ago, he'd been 80 pounds lighter. And back then he was not permitted to ride in one of the eight 40-foot Durham boats that recreated the famous battle with the Hessians.

"What a bummer," thought Ben. "'Took me years to get into the old boat, then I had to be Colonel Hand--nobody ever heard of him, just the general's personal physician. Finally I get to be George Washington and now I can't even stand up in my boat, sailing across the River, commanding my troops."

Despite the cold, thousands of spectators gathered on both sides of the Delaware. From a distance, in red, purple and yellow parkas, they brightened the dreary landscape. Scattered vendors were serving hot chocolate and tea and

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many of the spectators carried flasks in their pockets. The air smelled like cinnamon, brandy and chocolate. Young families, teens, boomers, even some codgers, were all there to participate in this yearly ritual.

Ben might as well have been wearing the fabled wooden teeth he was so out of sorts. He was there alone. His teen-aged son Adam had opted to visit a friend. Ben was afraid if he insisted that he come, Adam would complain to his mother, who lived three towns away from them. She might mount yet another court case to get Adam.

"Oh, God, Dad, don't you ever get tired of playing George Washington?" Adam would say. "You're at some picnic with lousy food or at some old public school or at that smelly old hall for the Veterans of Foreign Wars." Actually, Adam was starting to enjoy being home alone. He had his computer games and could call his mother.

Ben didn't mind "the smelly old halls," especially since last year, Governor Corzine had invited Ben to a reception for New Jersey mayors at Morvan. Ben came in his costume and give a brief talk about General Washington's battles in

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New Jersey. If he wasn't being George Washington, Ben moped and ate, even though his girth and his blood pressure were steadily rising.

Once, Ben's mother had great plans for her son. When he was three or four, Ben would spend hours sitting at his little table in the corner of the big country kitchen, making figures out of plasticene. He designed whole villages with little men from the faded red clay, while humming to himself. "One day you'll be a great man," his mother would tell him. Sometimes when his parents had friends over, his mother asked Ben to recite the names of the U.S. presidents in order. He was happy to oblige.

But Ben was not happy in school. The other kids pretty much ignored him, all except Bryan Donahoe, who, like Ben, made fun of the other kids and their teachers. Ben still remembered one of the cards he left for Mrs. Naus (the kids called her Mrs. Nauseous) saying, "Silas is read, Macbeth just blew; you make our class nauseous-P.U." While Ben won praises from Bryan for the nasty notes he wrote to fellow students and to a teacher or two, Bryan ingratiated himself

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with all his teachers and managed to get great grades while Ben was barely passing.

"You know more than all those teachers," Ben's mother, a first-grade teacher herself, told Ben when he brought home a poor report card. "Don't worry," she said, "the teachers are just jealous of you. Their own kids are stupid. Colleges will know how smart you are," she reassured him. "They'll all want you."

None did.

Ben soon found himself about to be drafted to Vietnam. His mother and father knew a Congressman and Ben ended up at Fort Dix in the reserves. But getting up at 5AM, making your bed so tightly that a quarter could bounce on the sheets—otherwise the sergeant would dump the cot over and you'd have to do it again—then marching in the cold dawn made Ben ill. He kept going AWOL to see his girlfriend Zoe. She was so much smarter than all the guys at Fort Dix, Ben thought, and she always had enough pot for her and Ben to get high for hours. Ben never knew where Zoe's money came from. Although her aunt was Mary Roebling, the bank

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President, and supposedly the richest woman in New Jersey, Zoe said they were never in touch. A year after Ben last saw Zoe, she committed suicide.

Ben was AWOL five times in three weeks and his sergeant was happy to get rid of him. After being dishonorably discharged, Ben ended up in a mental health clinic.

He spent most of his time in the art studio, creating towns and people out of clay, not much different from what he did at four years old, except this time he couldn't store his creations in the clinic's refrigerator. In fact, after he was discharged from the clinic, he went back on week-ends to work on his figures and to see Denise, a former patient whom he had a crush on.

It was around that time that Ben first saw "The Graduate." He loved Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of Benjamin and he saw the movie 16 times, finally convincing his Dad to buy him a second-hand red Alpha Romeo convertible, just like Benjamin's, so he could attend the local community college.

Ben spent eight years there. His greatest success was participating in an orientation movie for all in-coming

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students. In his red Alpha, dubbed "the Benjamin car," Ben would ride from building to building (each had an identifying sign on it), all around the sprawling campus, so students would know how to find their classes.

Ben finally found a way to graduate and by doing well on a test, secured a desk job in labor, not management, at the telephone company. At about the same time—Ben was in his early '30s—he tried out for a part in a play and the acting bug bit him. He was Bill Sykes in "Oliver Twist," where he became an angry villain, and the Mayor in "The Music Man," where he was the august leader of the town. But the part he loved the most was that of the old actor in "The Fantastics." Ben, in long johns—he was thin back then—played the creaky old man so many times that his only friend Bryan chided him, saying "you'll end up like Eugene O'Neill's old man. He played the Count of Monte Cristo so many times he was never offered another role."

Indeed, Ben's life was beginning to resemble one long drama. At a community theater, he met Jana, a wardrobe volunteer. Like his former girlfriends, Jana was needy. Married to a biologist whom she hated and the mother of a six-year-

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old whom she neglected, Jana teamed up with Ben. If they weren't in plays, they were watching them or dissecting each other, ending up in heated battles. Twice, Jana emerged with a black eye and a split lip.

When Ben discovered Jana cheating on him, with the lead in "Most Happy Fella," he threw a brick through her picture window and was promptly arrested.

Again, his mother and father came through with another local politician-friend and Ben avoided jail.

"Why is everyone so fucked up?" Ben wondered as he marched through one failed relationship after another. After living with his parents until his late '30s, he moved in with a roommate and eventually bought a townhouse. At the time, he was seeing Carrie. After five years of an on-again, off-again relationship, Catholic Carrie got pregnant and refused to have an abortion.

Ben was still acting in plays but the parts were fewer and farther between and he found he enjoyed being Colonel Hand, General George Washington's right-hand man. The costume,

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complete with sword, sash, epaulets, knee-high leather boots and a great tri-cornered hat, was impressive. Ben felt important. Carrie never missed a crossing during the five years they dated.

When Adam was born, Bryan convinced Ben to spread rumors that Ben was not Adam's father. Bryan hated Carrie, who was much prettier than his own wife, a mousy woman, who used to work at the phone company with Ben.

"Say she was screwing everyone," Bryan told Ben. Ben agreed although he knew that was not true. But Ben, who was the generous god father of Bryan's two young children, could not imagine having his own child. Plus Ben's mother and father did not want Ben to marry Carrie or have to support a child.

When President Clinton passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, allowing a parent to take a paid year to care for a child, Ben reconsidered. Adam was two at the time, being cared for by Carrie's mother, neighbors, practically any adult who was around. Since Ben hated his job at the phone company, he took early retirement and finally found a

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lawyer to discredit Carrie, who was working and taking anti-depressants, and convince a Judge to give Ben full custody of Adam.

Now Ben had a purpose in life; not only was he Colonel Hand, able to point out every route George Washington took during the Mercer County battles in 1776, but he also was a single father, dragging Adam everywhere, even getting a couple of local newspaper articles on fatherhood.

"Ben knows everyone—he gives advice to all the politicians and lawyers." And he is the perfect father **and** mother to Adam," bragged Ben's mother. Meanwhile, Ben kept playing George Washington—wherever he could get a gig—area historical societies, schools, bank openings, theatricals; he now had two complete costumes in case one was at the cleaners. He even managed to get a smaller costume for Adam, who donned it reluctantly.

Adam's friends' parents were much younger than Ben. They were not interested in George Washington or in Revolutionary War Battles or in history at all for that

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matter. Their world was a technology one, a world with which Ben was totally unfamiliar.

His mother was still his greatest fan. Although Ben never bought her a gift or took her out to dinner, especially after his Dad died, she called him several times a day after she retired and encouraged him go on and on about his George Washington gigs and about his life with Adam.

Gradually, Ben began to realize that his mother was losing her hearing. To compensate, she just talked, usually repeating something Ben told her ages ago or sharing gossip about her neighbors and friends. Ben had no interest. Also, Ben realized his Mother was becoming confused and paranoid. She went on and on about how one housekeeper after another was supposedly stealing from her.

That was what Ben was thinking about: he'd lost his audience. As he drove home from Pennsylvania that December twenty-fifth, he was considering George Washington's route—going through Bordentown, Trenton, on to Princeton, wiping out the Hessian army, when a huge SUV swerved on the ice. George Washington never knew what hit him.