

# **THE MOTHERING INSTINCT**

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## **CHARACTERS**

WOMAN                      A former nurse and midwife. Approaching middle-age.  
Pleasant, engaging demeanor.

## **SETTING**

A mining town in Appalachia, some years in the past (circa 1930 maybe).

The WOMAN's kitchen, spare but homey—a table, a chair, a lamp, an oven. A record player in one corner, a bassinet in the other. Baby clothes on a clothesline slung to one side.

(WOMAN is seated at her kitchen table, writing a note and listening to a record of swing music playing quietly on her turntable. She's dressed in her nurse's uniform—white skirt, blouse, sweater and cap. Throughout, she engages in activity that at first glance seems mundane, but eventually makes itself clear as studious preparation: she's putting her effects in order. Nothing in her demeanor betrays this. She acknowledges the audience, smiles, talks to us:)

WOMAN

Where do I start? One of the reasons I became a nurse and midwife was to be kind of a surrogate mom—'til I married and had a child of my own. And to become as prepared for my own delivery as possible.

(She unpins her cap, sets it on the table, seals her note in an envelope.)

WOMAN

Heck of a vocation—attend a perfect birth in the morning, then ride twenty miles to watch some miner die from black lung. Can't do anything. Slow it a little, speed it a little. But mostly you just observe.

(She gets up, takes the baby clothes down from the line, brings them to the table, sits, folds them neatly as she continues:)

WOMAN

I gave typhoid shots at the school, and right there I found a father for my child and husband for myself. He taught geography. Never been more than twenty miles outside our town but taught geography. You had to like him. *(beat)* Soon as I saw he seemed kind and suitably virile I wasted no time: courted all winter, engaged in spring, married as summer was ending. Spent the night in a boat upriver for our honeymoon. My plan was I'd conceive that very night. I didn't. In fact I didn't conceive all through fall. Nor in the whole next year. Every night without fail we tried. Every night without fail we failed. I got by counseling myself it was just going to be a rockier road than I'd conceived, but by my third year of non-conceiving I became convinced that although my then husband was an enthusiastic lover, I'd chosen the wrong man for the job. No one's fault. I considered my choices. Taking another partner while married wasn't one. Someone was sure to find out and my child would be shamed. Adoption was no option either, since buying some other mother's child would be like picking out a pet. The only choice was to start completely anew with a whole different husband, chosen much more carefully after reviewing ample evidence as to his potency. *(beat)* But to divorce my then husband would've meant an end to my chances at having a child altogether, 'cause our church would never have allowed me to remarry. A divorcee couldn't remarry. But a

widow, given a requisite period of mourning, very much could. In our circle divorce reflects a bungling little decision of man, whereas the death of a spouse is an act of god—or would be perceived as such. *(beat)* I cannot stress enough how much I cared for my then husband apart from his one failing of me, so my concern became how to end his life in a totally painless way, with the utmost regard for his comfort, preferably in such a manner that he'd never even know what happened. But at the same time present it in such a way as to look natural—an act of god from head to toe. *(beat)* I got this idea of using gas from the oven. It wouldn't take any equipment outside what we already had; planned right, it'd be quick, and best of all, I could do it while he was sleeping—completely painless. Getting him to sleep through the thing isn't such a big obstacle as it sounds: one of the mine shafts exploded in the dead of night once and it failed to wake him.

*(She retrieves a bottle of beer, opens it, drinks periodically.)*

WOMAN

It was his habit every Friday to drink two beers while I made dinner, another three while he ate, and two more after. He really let loose on the weekends. He'd fall fast asleep. I'd let him conk out here on his chair, slip out to listen to the radio with some of the other nurses at the clinic, then slip back home and put us to bed. *(beat)* That night I made scrod. We ate, drank our beer and listened to records. He liked Chopin piano pieces, always put him to sleep. We had this running joke: he'd say, "I'm never gonna hear the end of that record!" *(beat; drinks)* He fell straight to sleep in his chair.

*(She returns to her chair.)*

WOMAN

I sat here for, oh, 'bout half an hour, listening to the record and waiting for the oven to cool. Brought two pillows in, I figured one for his knees, one for his head. Laying his weight across my back I maneuvered him onto the floor—he coughed a couple times but didn't stir once. I opened the oven door, set down the pillows, turned on the gas valve, propped him up kneeling, stuck his head about halfway in, then—purely an afterthought—covered him with a blanket. I could only guess how long it would take, but I did know the beer would help. I just prayed he wouldn't wake. I turned the light out for him, like I always did while he slept, came into our sitting room, and listened to the last of the record play itself out. *(beat)* Couldn't even hear the jet. Five minutes. Ten minutes. I started to smell the gas. Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. I put a wet kerchief over my face and came in. The gas hit me like a wall. With what strength I'll never know I pulled him up, seated him back in his chair. I turned off the oven valve and opened the valve on the stove top just a smidgen, to make it seem as though we'd accidentally left

the gas on after dinner. Then slipped over to the clinic like usual. Afterwards my friend walked me home as she always did late at night; the second I opened the door she smelled it, shouted “You’ve got a gas leak!” God bless her. She ran in with me, threw open all the windows while I looked over my late husband in vain for signs of life. *(beat)* I passed the inquest with flying colors. It was beyond question how deeply I cared for him, how much I’d wished him to be the father of my child.

*(Beat; she retrieves, uncaps, and drinks another bottle of beer.)*

WOMAN

In our church you mourn a spouse for two years. I put on my black wool and crepe and used the time to quietly seek out new husbands. Futile. I wasn’t being persnickety—candidates flowed into town every week. The problem was most of them, like my late husband, had never been fathers. I had zero proof as to their potency—and I refused to roll the dice again.

*(She returns to her chair.)*

WOMAN

My hope was to find just one feasible candidate within the year after my mourning had ended. I didn’t. So I decided I’d consider whoever approached me. But I’d fallen victim to the common stigma of widows: ‘less she’s got money, no one wants to touch her. It’s even written, First Timothy 5:14: “I want the younger widows to marry, have children” but no one bit. Two years. *(beat)* As a last resort I crawled on my knees to the priest, told him, “Find anyone for me. Announce one of our women needs a husband, it’ll be looked on as a gracious act.” He said he wasn’t about to make such an announcement. I said “Then will you father my child for me, Father, as an act of charity?” He said that would go against his vows. I said “I made a vow too—am I not supposed to multiply?” *(beat)* I had one resort left—this widower, retired miner I nursed for black lung. His wife bore him six children—six. I married him. Seventy-one years old but I married him. *(beat)* I could waste lots of time regaling you with how decent he was, but let’s be honest: he could have been Dracula—I wanted his seed. *(beat)* Tragically, while this man was a champion procreator during his prime, at the point we wed his ability had literally petered out. He was sick—took him half the morning to even just catch his breath. In a good week he’d muster up the strength to have a go with me once—and whatever seed he gave was at best a watered-down version of what it had once been. I was watching my house burn down, and got to throw a bucket of water on it once a week! His condition grew worse as our marriage dragged on; after six months our stupid parody of intercourse ground to a halt altogether. So I approached him: “We both know why I wed you. It’s getting us nowhere. I’d like to release us from our contract. You don’t

really want to go back to being a child, do you? Someone else wiping you after you go to the bathroom? If I ever get to that state I pray someone helps me go to my rest with some dignity. And when you get to heaven, you know who I think the very first person it is you see? Your mother. Waiting right inside the gate to welcome you. And she takes you in her arms again after you've been outside them so long, and holds you to her as long as you desire. *(little beat)* That must be what heaven is: a single infinite embrace of mothers and children, my mother holding me in her arms, her mother holding her in hers, and her mother, and hers, all the way back to Eve. No wonder the angels sing.” *(beat)* And that convinced him. He smoked a cigarette while I brought the pillows in. Don't know why but I put the Chopin on the player.

**To read the rest of this play, please contact me at:  
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