

# Maternal Instinct

## Arden Church

Some would say that I was born without a maternal instinct, and perhaps that's true. I never wanted to have children; they held no appeal for me. Even as a child myself, I never wanted to play with baby dolls, only stuffed animals. When grown-ups went gaga over babies, I couldn't understand what all the fuss was about. Babies drool. Babies are sticky and soggy. They cry a lot, and, often smell bad.

Watching my sister and various friends go through their own pregnancies, sealed my convictions forever. While other women seemed to gravitate toward motherhood naturally. I wanted no part of it. I mean, really, who wants the joy of morning sickness? And aside from select waterfowl, who wants to waddle around for nine months while that special little someone perpetually perched on your bladder? Need I point out the joys of labor?

Even before we were married my husband, Travis, was aware of my unwillingness to have children. Perhaps, deep down inside he thought I would change my mind, maybe grow into the idea as time went on. And, while there may have been a nanosecond of doubt that I actually might be missing out on something—it was no match for the many happy hours already spent in a marriage built on the freedom to do as we pleased. The truth was, Travis and I *both* loved being childless.

And so it was on a Friday of Columbus Day weekend, and in the spirit of our unhindered marriage, that Travis and I were enjoying the prelude to a romantic weekend getaway upstate. My friends wedding and our 10th anniversary provided the excuse, and a quaint country inn described in the brochure as “warm and inviting guest room, with a fireplace and a luxurious down comforter.”, would provide the setting.

Prior to heading north, we began our weekend tryst with a cozy dinner at a favorite Italian haunt near our house. We toasted our happiness with a carafe of the “house” red wine and it warmed me, pleasantly.

When the waiter brought the check and while I was looking for my car keys in my pocketbook, eager to get home while the moment was still with us, our *obvious* intentions were interrupted by Tom's pager going off. (I affectionately refer to my husband as "Inspector Gadget" as he just *loves* his toys.) He fumbled around and checked the number on the display.

"I'll the call from the car," he said, "It's a number I don't recognize."

That night, rather than gracefully stepping out of my nightgown and into Travis' arms, I found myself sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with him, detained in the waiting area of our local police station. The lighting was glaringly bright. Not at all the romantic lighting I should've been bathed in. (I suppose a police station, by design, is not intended to be warm and inviting.) We did not hold hands. We sat alert on the wooden bench, waiting to find out what had happened? Why had we been summoned by the police and asked to get there quickly? We knew it had something to do with our toddler nephew, Michael, who should have been tucked in bed hours ago, but was apparently under police protection, after a violent domestic battle between his babysitter and her boyfriend. My sister-in-law, Michael's mother, had left him with some very unsavory people. According to the quick police report, and the reason they called us, Michael had apparently been used as human shield, and they weren't going to give him back to his mother who left him there. I shuddered thinking of darling little Michael's terror.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, two officials brought Michael into the harshly lit room. His mop of flaxen curls framed his sweet little face. His great big blue eyes searched our own faces. He was dazed, confused, and rubbing his eyes, and oh so tired.

The social worker gave us the lowdown. "We're placing the child under a 96-hour hold until Tuesday when the family court reopens. Your sister," she said, staring at Travis, "wants you to take him until then. Are you willing to do that?"

Travis looked at me "What do you think?"

"What happens to Mathew if we can't take him?" I asked.

"We will have to find a foster home for him."

"A foster home?" I couldn't contain the alarm in my voice. Even if Michael hadn't been my nephew, I was not willing to put *any* child into the foster system. No way. I wasn't heartless, just not maternally inclined. The foster system was a mess and Michael didn't belong in anything messier than

*this* situation. He belonged at home in bed dreaming of, well whatever it is that little boys dream of. He did not belong in this nightmare.

“Of course we’ll take him, until his mother can come and get him,” I said.

The social worker announced that he had forms to fill out with us before he could be released into our custody. Someone took Michael into another room to keep him occupied while we began answering a barrage of questions.

“Do you live in a house or an apartment?”

“House.”

“Do you own or rent?” “Does anyone else live with you?” “Do you have any children?” Then if you don’t have children” the social worker said, raising his eyebrows at my answer. “Do you have a crib for the baby?”

“No,” I said in a matter of fact tone. *We didn’t see the need for a crib*, I wanted to say. The surrealism of this moment was just beginning to sink in.

“Where is the baby going to sleep, if you don’t have a crib?” The social worker asked.

“Well,” I said tentatively, “we have a fold up cot, would that do?”

“No, the baby could fall out of it.”

“How about a dresser drawer or several blankets on the floor?” My mind was now racing with solutions, but when I blurted them out, they were continually rejected. “Honestly,” I wanted to say, all I need is something that will work until the stores open in the morning.”

“Travis,” I said, after remembering there was a playpen in my parents’ basement, and of course after asking the social worker if that was acceptable, and yes, he said it was, “I’ll stay here and do whatever I have to do. You go and get the playpen.”

I accompanied the social worker and Michael to the hospital. They wanted to examine him to determine if there had been any prior abuse. He was released with a clean bill of health.

When we finally arrived home at 3 a.m., the social worker was still on the job for the requisite home inspection to make sure we did have suitable shelter for this child. Travis and I passed muster, and then we all but passed-out, falling into bed exhausted and with not a single romantic feeling left between us—only bewilderment. I didn’t even think about Saturday’s wedding.

"We've got a wedding to go to today and now we have a party-crasher", I said as soon as I opened my eyes on Saturday morning, or was it still morning? I wondered if the Honeycomb cereal I had was baby-friendly? At least I had milk.

My sister-in-law *did* drop off items for the baby, but they wreaked of smoke and I could just about see the billows of cigarette smoke clouds when she handed them to me, quickly, sayig very little. I wouldn't even bring the items into the house . Off to the store I went as soon as the doors opened, and had myself an impromptu baby shower, gathering whatever supplies I thought I would need for the days ahead.

The wedding was lovely, and the fresh-faced addition sitting on Travis' lap drew stares and questions. When Travis and Michael retired to our room to give them both a rest, they were followed by a bunch of people and they too entertained a receiving line of their own, while I attended the reception and fielded the obvious questions.

The long weekend came and went. I took a couple of days off from work because I had no child care. It didn't seem like a big deal because Michael would be going home soon. Frankly, he was a novelty. Not dissimilar to getting a puppy -- you want to watch him every minute to see what he does, learn his schedule and routine, see if he likes you.

But Michael had separation anxiety to the nth degree. We couldn't leave the room, even if we were within his line of sight, he became completely hysterical if he thought we were intending on leaving him alone. When putting him to bed at night, I had to stay right next to the playpen, sitting and listening in the dark until his breathing slowed. That was the only way I *knew* he was really asleep. I had to sneak out of the room like a commando crawling along the front line trying to avoid getting shot.

Soon I had to get back to work, but I was facing an unfamiliar dilemma. I was, temporarily, a working parent in need of affordable, trustworthy childcare. Fortunately, some friends came to our rescue and were able to look after him during the day.

The days with Michael in our care turned into weeks, and the weeks turned into months. The court didn't automatically reinstate his mother's custody rights. She, too, had to prove she could provide a suitable home for the child, and she hadn't done a very good job if he had wound up at the police station.

With each delay on a decision came frustration. At first, my frustration was “Come on, this child needs to be back with his mother.” As time went by, the frustration morphed into a fear. “What if he *does* have to go back to her? Why did she leave him with those irresponsible people?”

Those questions plagued me, and the old conviction that I had no maternal instincts gave way to another certainty. This time it was a far more gripping certainty. “Mathew is far better off here. I don’t want him to regress. This is the most stability he’s ever had in his short little life.”

I railed. “How could somebody so out of control in her own life be in such control over mine? She knows he’s better off here. All she has to do is sign the TPR, terminating her parental rights and then ee could then adopt him and we could all be released from this limbo.”

My former, complete lack of maternal instinct, gave way to a whole new set of feelings, I’d never expected to have. Just before Michael’s third Christmas with us, we were able to adopt him. That Christmas morning, we didn’t need anything else under our tree, because Michael we became what was, and still is, our greatest gift.

While I don’t have stretch marks on my belly, I’m sure I have them on my heart from giving birth to Mathew in such a convoluted way. Though I never believed I wanted to be a mother, I’ve earned and cherish the coveted title, “Mom”.