

WHO'S THE MOTHER, ANYWAY?

By Audrey Taylor



ILLUSTRATED BY C. PITTS

A 'NEW WOMAN' NOVEL

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WHO'S THE MOTHER ANYWAY?

By Audrey Taylor

Many people argue that once the baby is born, being the birth mother is really not as significant as being the nurturing mother. As this story unfolds, perhaps a more definitive answer will be revealed.

Day 88 After Conception (A.C.)

Just three months into her pregnancy, Susan's husband is suddenly dealt a severe blow in the form of a permanent layoff from his job at the local newspaper.

Aimed at drastically reducing payroll in a last ditch effort to stave off bankruptcy, the move left Ira on the pavement after more than four years of dedicated service as a specialty writer. He'd been a regular contributor of human interest stories, earning a modest reputation in a comparatively short time span.

Both Ira and Susan had been unaware of the extent of the paper's difficulties. As a result, they were caught with their pants down. Not in her wildest dreams had Susan imagined Ira's job was in jeopardy when she agreed to start a family.

Now he was left to peddle his most recent articles to the other local publications, as he tried desperately to find a new niche for himself before the baby arrived.

Susan had already arranged for a three-month maternity leave. Her expected delivery date just happened to correspond with the end of Ira's unemployment checks, putting a real damper on what had been expected to be a joyous part of their lives. The thought of not having a cent coming in while she was on maternity leave did not bode well for their expanding family.

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After going through four weeks of "Sorry, we have nothing available at this time," Susan's worried face gazed across the dinner table at me as I finished eating, "Ira, we've got to face facts. You may not find another job in the foreseeable future. Nothing's going to stop the arrival of our baby." Her forehead was creased.

"I don't think moving somewhere else for a job is the answer, either. Remember, the bank is picking up all my medical costs and we don't want to fool with that." She got no argument from me.

"At least we know *my* position is safe when I'm ready to return." When she was in her serious mode she hated unnecessary interruptions, so I obligingly sipped my tea

and remained quiet. "Anyway, there's no guarantee you'd find something in another city."

She took a breath and I sat silently. I knew there was more.

"Besides saving all we can right now, we have to start thinking of the baby's arrival and how we'll handle the situation when I return to work. We certainly can't afford a full-time nanny as we originally planned."

"I'm sure I'll find something before then." My voice wasn't convincing, even to me.

"We've got to prepare for the chance that you don't," she said. Her level-headedness was a characteristic I admired. "Fortunately, with the nice raise I just got, we should be able to manage 'til I'm back to work. I think it's time to consider me the primary bread winner and adjust our thinking accordingly."

"You're probably right," I said. It was difficult to argue with her; I had so little fight left from my many rejections these past weeks.

"One benefit of being home is that you can handle the household duties so I can devote more energy to the baby. Between handling the job and the pregnancy, I certainly will need help with all the house stuff."

"Seems fair enough," I immediately thought to myself, "although I'll need time for interviews." I knew there was no arguing with her in her current condition. My reservations would have to wait.

"And something else, sweetheart," she continued. There was more? "I think it will be a good idea for you to learn baby care. So you can fill in when I need you."

This was getting more complicated.

"It would solve two problems." She had certainly thought this through. "First, we can avoid added day-care costs which our budget won't allow for. Second, I'll rest a lot easier knowing our daughter is getting a parent's care while I'm at work. You know I detest the idea of leaving her with a stranger. It would be a great relief." Her eyes were besieging me.

Whew, the responsibilities were piling up. I hardly knew the first thing about caring for a baby, much less doing housework.

As my mind tried to assimilate her words, she added more. "You could continue to write at home. When the baby's asleep or doesn't need your attention, you could mail your articles to magazines and periodicals around the country. I'll bet there's plenty of places looking for your type of human interest stories. You happen to be very good." The compliment felt good and blunted the pressure building inside me.

She certainly *had* put a lot of thought into this.

"I know the people at the day-care center mean well but I'd rest a whole lot easier knowing you were directly involved with her care."

We both knew of Susan's fear of leaving the baby with strangers. I recalled having said many times "that will never happen, hon," as I tried to assuage her anxieties.

She despised the idea of children being left with outsiders during their formative years. She had only agreed to stop using birth control when we focused on her repro-

ductive clock ticking away and I conceded to a full-time nanny. Now that goal seemed out of reach.

The sticky subject was already rearing its ugly head and the baby wasn't even here yet.

There was no way she would consider a delay in the pursuit of her career. We both accepted that as a given. Even taking off three months was driving her nuts. With her being the primary breadwinner, any thought of a sabbatical was thwarted before it could be voiced.

I hadn't missed her reference to it being a girl either. Smiling inwardly, I couldn't help wondering what I was getting myself into. The baby's good health, physically and mentally was our major concern.

"What happens if I find another job?" I offered.

"We'll deal with that when it occurs. Meanwhile, if you stick with your mailings, hopefully you'll develop a following and not have to ever leave the house."

That sounded so ominous. Like I was being delegated to household duties forever. I knew she needed some reassuring.

"Your stuff is really good. You have a unique talent. The Sentinel will rue the day they let you go. It's time to give up on the local publications and go national. With a concerted effort, I bet you'll find a niche for yourself in no time."

We should have only known the *kind* of niche I was about to discover. We probably would have doubled over in uncontrollable laughter. But how could we have even imagined the oddball cubbyhole I was soon to find myself entering.

It's amazing how the pressure was already lifting from my shoulders. My mounting anxieties of the past few weeks were dissipating; a sense of purpose and newfound energy was returning. I marveled at Susan's ability to find a positive solution to our strained situation.

It just might work.

Of course it depended on my ability to locate magazines and/or newspapers that had a need for my type of human interest stuff. Taking care of the baby didn't seem like *that* big a deal. The birth was still six months away and a lot could happen in that time.

Since I was the one who had pressed for a family, it seemed only right for me to be making a contribution, especially since I would be home so much of the time. Susan was doing most of it: carrying the baby, paying the mortgage and doing many of the household chores. Even though the idea wasn't thrilling, it was time to step up and do my part.

"It has possibilities," I begrudgingly admitted. It was troubling to make a serious commitment to handling the household chores, not to mention caring for the baby when she arrived. "I'm certainly willing to give it a try," I said, knowing I had an awful lot to learn and would need her help. "What's there to lose except some paper and postage... and my time, which there's plenty of at the moment. Who knows, maybe I'll become a national columnist some day." I felt I had to make light of the financial

strain I was feeling. "If I can just get a few publications to try my articles..." Everybody has to start somewhere.

Didn't Cochran and that guy, Alan Crichner, go through this? Now they were like favorite breakfast cereals, with people turning to their syndicated columns each and every morning. "I'll put a list of publications together tomorrow and rework some of my better stories. Can I count on you for editing help?"

"Sure, hon. With you doing the housework and baby stuff, I should have plenty of energy for that," she said, and just like that, our child's care had become my primary responsibility.

I guess it still felt temporary. Once I located something full-time, the whole situation would revert back to normal.

Susan sat next to me on the couch and suddenly reached over for a hug. I could see relief in her face as the burden was lifted from her shoulders. I realized how much I adored her, even as I watched the baby move suddenly, distorting her stomach. It definitely felt like a girl to me too. Watching her stomach move, I thought, "It's you and me kid, whenever you decide to get here. Take your time. It's a lot safer where you are."

Susan's positive attitude was an inspiration. Never once did she admonish me for the loss of my job or for failing to provide for our family. She always focused on positive solutions.

It never occurred to me I was now conforming to a carefully concocted plan Susan had devised to resolve several important issues for herself. All I could think of was how lucky I was to have her as my bride. I could only imagine other wives making their husband's life miserable for failing them at such a crucial time.

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The very next day, I selected four of my better stories and started getting them ready for mailing. Rewriting and updating them carefully, I hoped to broaden their appeal to a wider audience now that they were leaving the confines of our conservative Midwest community.

Three days later, they were in the mail, after I had painstakingly researched the best potential publications from around the country. Over 125 copies went out with a personal cover letter. It was tedious work but I was intent on giving it the old college try.

Next, I started poking around town, intent on finding developing human interest stories with broad consumer appeal, something I could sink my teeth into.

Quite naturally, topics close to my heart tended to catch my eye. Invariably, these subjects became my more highly-regarded articles as I would throw so much of myself into them. This was a tendency that was to prove vital for my new, developing, career path.

At the time I had no idea in *what* direction my career was heading. Had someone hinted at it to me, I would probably have told them they were ready for the loony bin.

With so many layoffs at the area's larger companies recently, I sensed a need to delve deeper into the personal issues of those affected. I knew first hand about the financial pressures being felt at the companies as they scrambled to survive a recession that had its grip on the entire tri-state area.

How were the affected individuals and their families coping? Were they in similar situations to my wife and myself? How were they dealing with the strain and uncertainty of unemployment? It certainly was a subject close to my heart.

It was fairly easy to find people willing to share their anger and feelings of betrayal from the companies who had demanded their loyalties for so many years. There were a whole slew of horror stories a lot worse than mine, which gave me pause when I thought of complaining. So many of the people I met were sole wage-earners and had little, if any, savings to fall back on. I pared down the stories so my readers could identify and sympathize with each subject.

Susan thought it an appropriate subject and was quick to offer her own feelings on the subject. From her banking perspective, she knew many companies that could save money without resorting to layoffs, but instead were joining the bandwagon so they could add still more to their already hefty bottom lines. They had no compunction about betraying the very people that had made them so successful.

Meanwhile, concern continued to mount inside Susan as each pay check was cashed and the arrival of her leave of absence drew ever closer.

She wasn't truly comfortable with my ability to handle the baby, as she sensed a need for further training even though I had read several books and articles on the wonderful subject of newborns and their earlier years.

I had to agree with her. To tell the truth, the books and articles actually amplified my feelings of inadequacy which was probably what her antenna was picking up. What *was* I getting myself into?

Begrudgingly, I agreed to enroll the two of us in a baby care course which promised to impart all the vital information needed to care for our little girl when she arrived. It couldn't be soon enough for Susan; she was already getting antsy.

Day 115 A.C.

As you might expect, I'm the only male in the class. I take the friendly jesting in spirit, maintaining a stoic front to hide my intense feelings of inadequacy as we share all the wonderful knowledge meant for the female of our species.

I'm learning the proper technique for diaper changing, bathing and the zillion and one things a baby will require in the early stages of life. It must make a comical picture, this group of progressively expanding women and my lone emaciated masculine image, passing around a baby from shoulder to shoulder to practice the proper technique for encouraging the burp during feeding time. A life-size doll is used.

My feelings of being an outsider become even more intense when the subject of breast feeding is broached. The instructor pays me little heed as she reviews the proper technique for cleaning the breast and how to alternate sides and know when the baby

is satisfied or when the milk supply is depleted. It's very informative even though I know my active participation will not be called for.

By this time, the women are quite accustomed to me and hardly hesitate when the instructor asks them to bare their breasts to practice the cleaning techniques on themselves. Once outgoing Betty loosens her bra, the others follow suit without further thought to my male presence. A strange sense of confusion threatens to overwhelm me, making me wonder who I was really am at the moment. It's like I've stepped into a woman-only world and been assimilated.

As I calm down, I watch them practicing while trying to ignore my non-participation.

When Nancy, the instructor, suggests I remove my shirt and practice on myself, my cheeks redden instantly. Other than Susan, all the rest are planning on staying home for the immediate period after birth, their careers put on hold for the time being without regret. Their eagerness to deal hands on with this new life situation is compelling.

My classmates eagerly shared their thoughts when we met after class for some intensive interviews. I even arranged meetings after the babies are born so we can examine whether the birthing experience lived up their expectations. In the meantime, my involvement with the subject was becoming all-absorbing. I found myself spending long research hours at the library, going over the many articles already written on the subject.

My awe of women grew as I read my way through the profusion of information on the wonderful nurturing instincts that seem to surface so effortlessly with the approach of a child. Within women, there seems to be an innate mothering quality that guarantees the welfare of the child.

When one realizes the huge changes a woman goes through during pregnancy, it's almost staggering. And yet, women are going through this each and every day without complaint.

Loveplay and sexuality fall off dramatically, replaced by graduated feelings of inadequacy that seem to rise in direct proportion to the expanding life in their wombs. All other concerns are neatly pushed aside. Not a single woman in our group was the least embarrassed when strange hands explored their bellies, something they never would have imagined previously. Their pregnancy is something to be shared with the whole world.

My own inadequacy was growing with Susan's size, born of a gnawing fear of the numerous needs of the baby when she arrived.

I was in a strong writing phase and concern was also rising for the many interruptions I would have to endure.

"It's because your body doesn't have the maternal hormones working inside a woman," Susan said, trying to explain my troubling thoughts. "It's normal for a woman. Caring for her newborn chases all other concerns away. Stop worrying, Darling. We'll figure something out."

I wasn't convinced.

Day 132 A.C.

When I saw Susan holding a pill container that Saturday morning and studying me thoughtfully, I shouldn't have been surprised by the idea brewing in her cute little head. I guess it was just a natural progression for her to find a solution for my anxieties and look out for our baby's welfare.

When I sat down opposite her, holding a cup of hot java, she started explaining how it was important for me to get in touch with my "motherly feelings". According to Susan, it would make things much easier when the baby arrived.

It was quite apparent to her that the baby's arrival was raising a whole new bunch of fears for me to tangle with. I would have enough to handle without all these floating anxieties as well.

She wanted me to try hormone pills a doctor had prescribed for her several years earlier when she had dealt with a bout of fatigue. She assured me they were only to help me get in touch with my motherly side. We all had one in us, even the most manly man. It would go a long way to relieving my feelings of detachment which I had shared with her the other day after class.

"Men don't instinctively know what a baby needs. It's so apparent in class when I watch you trying to keep up with us. Even with your strong effort, you still lack the enthusiasm the others bring to class. Instead, you are tentative and that worries me. Tell me the truth, isn't it a bit uncomfortable for you?"

I grimaced before offering quietly, "Just a bit."

She went on, "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea in the first place? It's not your fault. I know you're trying your hardest but I'm afraid this whole thing will turn into a nightmare for both of us." My underlying discomfort was obviously noticeable.

"You know how quickly babies can pick up on uncertainty and how impossible it becomes to quiet them once the message comes through. I think you should try these a little while and see if it doesn't help."

No one could say she wasn't dedicated to this going smoothly, even if it meant tossing aside her husband's masculinity for the time being, all for the sake of reaching my "maternal instincts"—assuming they were present in my male anatomy.

There was no question what was foremost in her mind. She wanted to return to work with a clear conscience, confident that things would be stable at home.

I have to admit to a certain curiosity running around in me, almost a jealousy of the pleasure these ladies enjoyed while they awaited the birth of their child. *Could* a man experience similar feelings given the aid of hormones? This could be a unique chance to explore that very question.

Neither of our parents provided any help at all; both couples are older and disinterested in caring for an infant for more than a few hours, if that. Both couples are retired in Florida and happily leading independent lives. We were indeed thankful they weren't a burden on us.

My taking female hormone pills seemed a bit extreme, though, even if it *would* reassure Susan. I knew how important it was that everything go smoothly. Would this *really* make a difference? Would trying them for a while hurt?

In the back of my mind, I always knew I had the option of dropping them at any time.

Susan's peace of mind was an important ingredient for a healthy child, and I certainly wanted to contribute to that.

And the strain wasn't showing only on Susan. With the continuing lack of a regular paycheck, my confidence at baby class was seriously eroding. I couldn't let her down any further.

All day long I would sit comfortably in the den writing my sample articles while Susan was out on her feet most of the day bringing in the bacon. The least I could do was give her peace of mind until the baby arrived. It probably wouldn't really mean much and I could just drop it when the baby arrived. Gaining a little femininity certainly wouldn't kill me, and it *might* just make the whole baby situation more palatable.

Besides, I was feeling sorry for myself. Lately, Susan's lack of sex drive was getting to me. Even though I knew her behavior was normal, it still left my manhood struggling for approval.

What the hell, if she didn't care, why should I? I swallowed the purple tablet with a glass of orange juice and went right back to my writing desk.

Day 185 A.C.

With the start of Lamaze classes and the end of our baby course last Tuesday, there's not much rest for the weary. Susan's patience is starting to wear thin. Usually she's thoroughly exhausted when she gets home from work. I do my best to handle all the household needs, usually having dinner ready on the table and a broad smile on my face as she waddles through the front door. I *hope* it helps but I'm not so sure.

My best writing is done in the early morning hours, well before the sun rises, even if that sometimes means a late afternoon nap to revitalize myself before Susan arrives. Most of my chores are done by noon and handling dinner is a snap when I get up from my nap.

It's amazing how my perspective is changing since I started with the hormone tablets. Besides some outward changes which only seem to delight Susan, I've become a lot more introspective, experiencing a frequency of mood swings I've never had before. Thank God that Susan is there and understands. I've gotten used to the gentle interplay we share in the evening. Usually we sprawl out on the living room couch as I massage her tired feet and legs while she shares the daily office gossip.

One Saturday morning, Susan noticed me sweeping the floor and suddenly arose and went to the bedroom. I heard her opening and closing several drawers before calling me in for a "surprise". She had several items laid out on the bed, and asked if I might like to try them on while I did housework. I saw the gleam in her eye as I slowly

absorbed her meaning. My eyes took in the white panties and bra laying over the purple flowery house dress she used to wear.

“Your femininity is starting to show through. I suppose it’s only right that you wear something more appropriate around the house.”

She’d accidentally discovered my developing charms a few nights earlier but I was wrong if I thought she’d let it drop. She had inadvertently placed a hand on my chest as I worked on her feet. Her big belly was pressing into me and her hand quite casually came to rest on my breast, squeezing reflectively as she’d done many times in the past, only to find an enlarged mound where there had never been one before. I had avoided mentioning it, not wanting to draw undo attention to myself during this trying time.

“It’s a good thing I’m growing with this pregnancy,” her hand continued to explore me, “otherwise you’d be stiff competition.” Leave it her to make light of something that was quite disturbing to me. “You feel like you’re ready for a training bra.” I couldn’t believe her matter-of-fact tone about the whole thing.

“It doesn’t bother you?” Her casual attitude left me befuddled; I was intensely troubled by the growing sensitivity of my expanding chest.

“Why should they?” I asked.

Her response was immediate. “Wasn’t I the one to suggest hormones in the first place? It stands to reason your breasts will develop. You’ve been on the pills close to eight weeks now. I’m surprised I didn’t notice something sooner. You’ve developing quite nicely.” Her smile annoyed me as her hand squeezed me yet again.

I just sat there rubbing her foot, stymied at how to reply.

“It’s really neat. Haven’t you noticed how much more relaxed you are during La-maze class? I think our plan is working.” Her self-satisfied grin had me wondering about the further details of “our plan”.

“Are they sensitive?” Her fingers had stopped toying with my turgid nipple. The stimulation was threatening to ruin my composure.

“Can you feel this?” She was driving me to distraction. “*Tell* me that doesn’t feel good,” she cooed, running her fingers over my firm nipple and making me squirm.

“A little,” I said, my hesitant reply sounding tinny. My mounting arousal was hard to contain.

Later when we snuggled close in bed, her hands seemed to naturally find my breasts when we cuddled. “I’d better stop those pills soon,” I thought, laying there enjoying the delightful sensations she elicited from them. She finally dropped off to sleep and so did I.

So far I haven’t stopped the pills; now she’s suggesting I try her clothes “for around the house”. Marvelous.

This was getting a little out of hand. I had the definite sense this whole scenario was spiraling out of control.