

MATERNAL INSTINCTS

by

Laura Kipnis

"LIKE SHITTING A PUMPKIN" is how radical feminist Shulamith Firestone famously described childbirth, though she hadn't had the experience herself; it was a friend's report on what labor was like, shortly after the happy event. It only confirmed Firestone's view that childbearing was barbaric, and pregnancy should be abolished. Beyond the personal discomfort, her larger point was that women aren't going to achieve social equality until some technological alternative is invented to save us from being the only sex expected to go through it. If men were the ones forced to endure this ordeal, obviously such a technological solution would long ago have been devised.

Firestone was clearly no fan of Nature, an animus I find myself reliving whenever I hear people, especially women,

espousing such supposedly “natural” facts as maternal instinct and mother-child bonds. It’s not that I think these things don’t exist; they certainly do. They exist as social conventions of womanhood at this moment in history, not as eternal conditions, because what’s social is also malleable.

But what’s with all the sentimentality about nature anyway, and the kowtowing to it, as though adhering to the “natural” had some sort of ethical force? It’s not like nature is such a *friend* to womankind, not like nature doesn’t just blithely kill women off on a random basis during childbirth or anything. No one who faces up to the real harshness of nature can feel very benignly about its tyranny. Sure, we like nature when it’s a beautiful day on the beach; less so when a tidal wave kills your family or a shark bites off your arm. If it were up to nature, women would devote themselves to propagating the species, compliantly serving as life’s passive instruments, and pipe down on the social demands. It’s only modern technology’s role in *overriding* nature—lowering the maternal death rate, inventing decent birth control methods—that’s offered women some modicum of self-determination. If it comes down to a choice, my vote’s with technology and modernity, which have liberated women far more than getting the vote or any other feminist initiative (important as these have been), precisely by rescuing us from nature’s clutches.

But my quarrel with the concept of maternal instinct isn’t why I never had kids myself. I was never particularly opposed to the idea of having kids—let no one say that I don’t love

kids! It always seemed like an interesting future possibility, the same way that joining the Peace Corps someday seemed like an interesting future possibility. And though neither possibility ever consolidated into action, I still feel I’ve done my share when it comes to ensuring the future of humanity. Let no one say that I didn’t spend the equivalent of a year’s college tuition hauling my beloved niece and two nephews to the movies regularly during their formative years, bribing them into good behavior with pricey buckets of popcorn and gallons of soda. Let no one say that I didn’t do my best to imbue them with my values (social rebellion, critical thinking), and subtly shape them in my image, a project that continues to this day—at holidays I like to slip them hundred-dollar bills with my picture taped over Franklin’s “Who’s your favorite grown-up?” I wheedle, when their parents are out of earshot. Under my careful tutelage, they’ve evolved into fast-talking and ironically hilarious little wiseasses, tolerating and mocking my improvement campaigns; pocketing the cash; pretending to note my reading suggestions and life lessons. I think we understand one another.

No, despite my proven talents at nurturing, I don’t believe in maternal instinct because as anyone who’s perused the literature on the subject knows, it’s an invented concept that arises at a particular point in history (I’m speaking of Western history here)—circa the Industrial Revolution, just as the new industrial-era sexual division of labor was being negotiated, the one where men go to work and women stay

five. It was only as families began getting smaller—birthrates declined steeply in the nineteenth century—that the emotional value of each child increased. Which is where we find the origin point for most of our current ideas about maternal fulfillment.

All I'm saying is that what we're calling biological instinct is a historical artifact—a culturally specific development, not a fact of nature. An invented instinct can feel entirely real (I'm sure it can feel profound), though before we get too sentimental, let's not forget that human maternity has also had a fairly checkered history over the ages, including such maternal traditions as infanticide, child abandonment, cruelty, and abuse.

But the real reason I'm against the romance about maternal instincts is that what gets lost amid this fealty to nature is that nature hasn't been particularly kind to women, and I say we owe it no favors in return. If women have been "ensnared by nature" as Simone de Beauvoir (no fan of maternity herself) put it, if it's so far been our biological situation that we're the ones stuck bearing the children, then there should be a lot more social recompense and reparations for this inequity than there are. The reason these have been slow in coming? Because women keep forgetting to demand them, so convinced are we that these social arrangements are the "natural" order of things. The willingness to call an inequitable situation "natural" puts us on the royal path to being society's chumps.

Even though I never actually ruled out having kids, I

home raising kids. (Before that, pretty much everyone worked at home.) The new line was that such arrangements were handed down by nature. As family historians tell us, this is also when the romance of the child begins—ironically it was only when children's actual economic value declined, because they were no longer necessary additions to the household labor force, that they became the priceless little treasures we know them as today. Once they started costing more to raise than they contributed to the household economy, there had to be *some* justification for having them, which is when the story that having children was a big emotionally fulfilling thing first started taking hold.

It also took a decline in infant-mortality rates for mothers to start regarding their offspring with much affection. When infant deaths were high (in England before 1800 mortality rates were 15 to 30 percent in the first year of life), maternal attachment ran understandably low. As historian Lawrence Stone pointed out, giving a newborn child the same name as a dead sibling was a common practice; in other words, children were barely regarded as distinct individuals. They were also typically sent to wet nurses following birth—so much for the mother-child bond—and when economic circumstances were dire, farmed out to foundling hospitals or workhouses ("little more than licensed death camps," said Stone). But then childhood as such really didn't exist, or at least it wasn't a recognizable concept, as historian Philippe Ariès documented; this, too, is a social invention. Children were viewed as small adults; apprenticed out to work at age

how I'd carry all that stuff. I thought about giving up the fellowship (for about a nanosecond), but this didn't seem like the wisest life choice, as I'd been lucky beyond belief to get it. My boyfriend, too, had his dream gig—he wasn't about to give it up (and even if he had, then do what for money, play bar mitzvahs?). It took me about ten seconds—far less time than it took to type this paragraph—to conclude that having a baby was unfeasible, or not feasible under the current conditions of isolate do-the-best-you-can parenthood. I had an abortion.

I realize, looking back, that the image of myself struggling on the train with too much baggage was analogous to my sense of what being a mother would feel like: weighted down and immobilized, though my ambivalence surely had as much to do with my perception of the social role of “mother” as with diaper bags. (I probably could have bought a car for the commute instead of struggling on the train—I later did just that.) But one of the pleasures of living with a jazz musician was picking up and meeting him in far-flung places on short notice, or traveling as a band girlfriend for stretches: jaunts to Japan, Europe, Omaha. I learned to pack light and not carp about delays. (Also to go through a different customs line than the band unless I wanted every last toiletry opened and sniffed.) I liked having the kind of life where you didn't know what was going to come next; the opposite of what life as a mother would be, or so I presumed.

Some might adduce that my getting pregnant (yes, more than once) suggests that I was more eager to embark on the

suppose I wasn't that deeply identified with the prospect of maternity either, which meant that I was always a little more casual about birth control than a fully cognizant anatomical female probably should be. I never entirely connected sex and procreation—it didn't help that I generally used methods you don't have to actively think about, like IUDs—which resulted in a few pregnancies over the years whenever I took a month or two off between the previous model and its successor. Pregnancies are useful for clarifying one's life priorities, of course, but they also clarify a lot about the prevailing conditions of motherhood when you're deciding whether or not to sign on for the long haul.

The second to last time I got pregnant, I was in a long-term relationship, which is one of the usual practical considerations for those contemplating motherhood. My boyfriend and I had been living together for about five years at that point—we'd stay together for twelve and eventually even buy a house together—meaning we were stable enough, and financially comfortable enough. Except that he was the bass player in a well-known jazz band and thus on the road about half the year, and I'd just received a three-year fellowship at the University of Michigan and was planning to commute by train between Ann Arbor and Chicago when my boyfriend was in town (though he promised to come up for weekends when he could). Contemplating the result of the pregnancy test, I envisioned myself on the train lugging a baby, a computer (they were a lot heavier in those days), books, and the requisite ton of baby paraphernalia, and I couldn't imagine

path of motherhood than I'm letting on. Maybe so, but I think not—it's not like I agonized about having abortions or regretted them later. I was willing to contemplate kids, though if I'm being honest, among the factors militating against it was my profound dread of being conscripted into the community of other mothers—the sociality of the playground and day-care center, and at the endless activities and lessons that are de rigueur in today's codes of upper-middle-class parenting. It terrified me. For one thing, I've never been good at small talk, or female conventionality. Also, the mothers I met struck me as a strange and unenviable breed: hurried, hampered, resentful. I didn't want to accidentally become one of them. I know there are unparalleled joys in having children—the deep love for another creature; the connection to a greater human purpose. But then there are the day-to-day realities. Let's face it: children's intellectual capacities and conversational acumen are not their best features. Boredom and intellectual atrophy are the normal conditions of daily life for the child-raising classes. All of which I could see all too plainly on the faces of the other women around the swing set when I hauled my beloved niece and nephews to various playgrounds or trotted them around to kiddie museums over the years. Not to mention (how to put this politely?) that child raising is not what you'd call a socially valued activity in our time despite the endless sanctimony about how important it is, which those doing the labor of it can't help being furious about—quietly furious about being dropped down a few dozen rungs in the social-equity ranks. You have to wonder:

Is it really such a great idea to rely on the more aggrieved sex—those whose emotional needs are most socially disparaged, whose labors are most undervalued, and who may consequently be a little . . . on edge—to do the vast majority of the child rearing?

Lately I've been hearing from childless female friends and acquaintances about their sense of being judged by this community of other women for not having children, as though their *not* having children betrays all the women who took a hit for the team. I can't say I ever felt any such disapproval myself (maybe I was just oblivious), or family pressure, but apparently it can be intense. (I recently said to my mother, "How come you never pressured me to have kids?" She rolled her eyes and said, "What good would it have done?") But then you also hear from friends and acquaintances who *have* had kids about feeling judged by the community of other mothers for such things as not pureeing their own organic baby food, or other failures to comply with the many heightened requirements set by today's former careerists turned full-time moms.

Apparently, the more "progressive" the community, the more intense the inducements to do it all "naturally"—once again, nature and women locked in some sort of master-slave dialectic. I listen, I ponder, and in my darkest heart, I think that motherhood today is no less deforming than when Betty Friedan detailed maternal malaise in 1960; it just takes updated forms. Women are still angry about feeling duped and undervalued, but instead of ignoring their kids and

downing cocktails all day, as in Friedan's time, now we have the angry overdrive child-rearing style: motherhood as a competitive sport.

Back to women and nature. Let me say something possibly controversial in the hopes of clarifying something else. When it comes to female anatomy, it's not only being saddled with the entire excruciating, immobilizing burden (sorry, "privilege") of childbearing that we're dealing with (a privilege that can kill you, thanks). It gets worse. Among nature's other little jokes at women's expense is the placement of the clitoris, a primary locale of female sexual pleasure, at some remove from the vagina, a primary locale of human sexual intercourse. Perhaps this mainly affects women who have sex with men, but that's still a majority of us, because apparently some percentage of men don't automatically fathom these anatomical complexities, or so say researchers who collect data on women's orgasm rates compared to men's. On this score, women lag far behind. (I realize that orgasms aren't the sole index of sexual pleasure, but surely they're *something*.)

Now, we could account for the orgasm gap between men and women by simply concluding that women are anatomically constructed in such a way that a certain amount of sexual dissatisfaction comes with the territory, and leave it at that. But mostly we don't say that, because even though the anatomy in question can be enlisted to tell that story, it's not the socially favored narrative at the moment. The preferred story is that women and men are entitled to sexual equity; sexual pleasure is as much a woman's right as a man's—even

the men's magazines say so! In fact, it's now such a mainstream view that network sitcoms make jokes about it. Pretty much everyone these days knows that with a small amount of reeducation and patient communication, men can be schooled into becoming better lovers. A lot of men these days even take pride in developing such skills—I've seen T-shirts to this effect.

My point is that women have been a lot more inventive at demanding sexual pleasure than at demanding maternity reform. When it comes to sexual pleasure, whatever inequities nature has imposed on women can be overcome; in other words, culture overrides anatomy. Yet when it comes to maternity, somehow everyone's a raging biological determinist. Not only are women fated to be the designated child *bearers* in this story, but this mostly still translates into their taking on the social role of raising them, too. Even with men doing more parenting than before, the majority of women are still left facing the well-rehearsed motherhood-versus-career dichotomy. But it's *not* a dichotomy; it's a socially organized choice masquerading as a natural one. There would be all sorts of ways to organize society and sexuality that don't create false choices if we simply got inventive about it—as inventive as we've been about equity in sexual pleasure—but there has to be the political will to do it. There has to be the right story going in.

It must be said that women themselves haven't helped much here, at least not those who go around touting our mystical relation to nature—maternal instincts, mother-child

bonds, and so on. According to Diane Eyer's *Mother-Infant Bonding*, the concept that bonding has any biological basis is "scientific fictionalizing." Bonding research has been dismissed by most of the scientific community as an ideological rather than a scientific premise, Eyer says, driven by popular concepts about natural womanhood and a woman's place being in the home. No one ever talked about such bonds before the rise of industrialization, when wage labor first became an option for women. Note that the bonding story got revved up again in the early 1970s, as women were moving into the labor market (screwing up traditional conceptions about the natural female role), popularized by child development experts like pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, who said that mothers who don't stay at home bonding with their children for the first year spawn delinquents and terrorists.

So the question we're left with is this: What's the most advantageous story to adopt about female biology and nature? If we keep telling the one about nature speaking to women in a direct hookup from womb to brain, then guess what? This *will* parlay into who should do the social job of child rearing and under what conditions. Men will have less reason to sign up for child-rearing equity (assuming there's a man in the picture), day care will *never* be a social entitlement like public education, and the issue of how to manage a child and a job will continue to remain each lone woman's individual dilemma to solve, even when that job is an economic necessity, as is certainly the case for the majority of mothers today.

At one point, in my late thirties, I thought for a bit about having a child on my own. I was no longer with the musician boyfriend. My next boyfriend and I occasionally fantasized about having a kid—he even once proposed during such a reverie, on a romantic boat trip—but though we were together for years, we couldn't get along for a sufficient stretch of time to accomplish either marrying or procreating. After we split up, I wasn't in anything very serious with anyone for a while, though there was a man I used to roll around with on a casual basis. When I told him I was thinking about having a kid, he said he'd be happy to try to get me pregnant if I wanted, though he didn't want to be involved in raising a child. So that was one practicality taken care of, at least. I approached my sister, the one who'd borne my beloved niece and nephews, to ask whether, if I had a kid, it could sort of lodge with her while I was at work or out of town—she had so many kids underfoot already, one more wouldn't be that noticeable. I'm sorry to say that she laughed in my face (though in a kindly way, she instructs me to add). When she got done laughing, she explained that it was a well-known fact that no nanny or babysitter would work in a house with four children; three was the limit. I tried guilt-tripping her, but she wasn't biting. The single motherhood idea faded away a short time later.

When I hear pundits going on lately about the declining birthrate and the graying of the population, I know that it's all my fault. In case you haven't heard, birthrates across the industrialized world have been in steep decline ever since

the advent of the Pill. (While an overpopulation crisis looms in the developing world, underpopulation hits this part of the globe.) Though it wasn't due to the Pill alone: once women started entering institutes of higher education in increasing numbers, and the job market opened its arms (if not its coffers), birthrates plummeted even further. As much as women talk the talk about maternal instinct, fewer than ever are walking the walk: the fastest-growing segments of the female population now have either zero children or one child by age forty. According to demographers, the consequences down the road will be seismic: an aging citizenry unable to sustain itself economically (Social Security is already basically a national Ponzi scheme, some are calculating).

Though no one exactly says it, women are voting with their ovaries, and the reason is simple. There are too few social supports, especially given the fact that the majority of women are no longer just mothers now, they're mother-workers. Yet virtually no social policy accounts for this. Interestingly, women with the most education are the ones having the fewest children, though even basic literacy has a negative effect on birthrates in the developing world—the higher the literacy rate, the lower the birthrate. In other words, when women acquire critical skills and start weighing their options, they soon wise up to the fact that they're not getting enough recompense for their labors. In trade union terms, you'd call it a production slowdown, though in places like Japan the birthrate has fallen so drastically it's more of a full-fledged strike. Over there it's prompting national soul-searching, appointed

commissions, and even some discussion of a previously unheard-of option: more social welfare spending on mothers and children.

And what about here? Maintaining the species is something the United States, too, would appear to have a stake in. But until there's a better social deal for women—not just fathers doing more child care but vastly more social resources directed at the situation, including teams of well-paid professionals on standby (*not* low-wage-earning women with their own children at home)—birthrates will certainly continue to plummet.

In retrospect, not having children feels to me like having dodged a bullet. I think the lifestyle would have felt too constricting, too routine, though I do sometimes encounter women who seem to manage it with panache. (Usually these are women with the resources for lots of child care.) Still, I confess to feeling an unseemly little pleasure at having eluded nature's snare, saying “fuck you” to all that, though nature's going to get us all in the end, obviously. It's also my little “fuck you” to a society that sentimentalizes children except when it comes to allocating enough resources to raising them, and that would include elevating the 22 percent of children currently living in poverty to a decent standard of living.

If “maternal instinct” is a synonym for wanting to devote your life to something, or be absorbed in someone other than yourself, then fine. But its having been invented in the first place means there's no reason such an instinct can't be

invented differently, including in men. Men may not yet be able to biologically bear children (though how far off can that day be, or Firestone's dream of test tube offspring?), but when women no longer have an exclusive relation to such things, no doubt raising children will become a more socially valued enterprise, and everyone will be far happier about the situation.

But that's not "natural," you say? While I'm confessing things, I must further confess that every time I hear someone use the word *natural* in conjunction with women and maternity, I want to rip them limb from limb. *How's that for "natural"?* I'd like to say. *That's* how nature likes it—brutal, painful, and capricious. So please shut up about nature already.

A THOUSAND OTHER THINGS

by

Kate Christensen

I DON'T HAVE KIDS, and I'm very glad I don't, although there was a time when I wanted them more than anything.

These days, I live in a nineteenth-century brick house in the gritty, beautiful, easygoing seaside town of Portland, Maine, with my boyfriend of almost six years, Brendan, and our sweet old dog, Dingo. Brendan is thirty-two; I'm almost fifty-two. Despite or maybe because of our age difference, we're deeply happy and contented in the way of best friends who can't bear to be apart and yet maintain an inextinguishable spark of mutual attraction.

This isn't a life I thought I would ever have, especially ten or fifteen years ago—not even close. Back then, I thought I'd never leave New York; I was embedded in a long-term marriage, and believed that I was past any major upheaval.