

*The Mother
& Invention*

a novel by
Nina Miller



CHAPTER ONE

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Claire Goldstein phoned the office of *Scholars*, where she was the editor of the newsletter for the faculty of Arts and Sciences, to remind her administrative assistant Marianne that she had a doctor's appointment and wouldn't be in until after lunch. It was probably an unnecessary precaution, but Marianne, usually so crisp and efficient, had been self-absorbed and distracted for the last few weeks.

Claire was long overdue for her gynecological checkup, something she regarded with dread. She hadn't minded the appointments when she was pregnant all those years ago, first with Stephen, then with Sarah. For those brief months she had been able to overlook what she was sure was the doctor's misogyny so long as she focused on the promised reward at the end of her tunnel. But after she had finished having children, the combination of dislike and anxiety kicked in and she would forget to schedule appointments, or would double-book with an important meeting at the university and apologetically call the doctor's office to cancel.

“Why don’t you change goddam doctors?” Marco, her husband, would ask as she worked herself up before each visit, which became more widely spaced as the years went by. But Claire hated change.

She waited for almost an hour and a half in a reception room filled with big-bellied women whose faces reflected both the smug narcissism and the discomfort of the very pregnant. Hands atop their Buddha bellies, they chatted with each other about due dates, false labor, fluid retention. She seemed to be the only gynecological check-up on this morning’s schedule, and the others eyed her as if she were a member of a different species. Well, at least this was one place where she felt slim, her hand on the less prominent bulge of her own stomach. Most of the young women wore tight-fitting tops over low-slung jeans or shorts, their basketball tummies proudly declaring themselves, so unlike the maternity outfits Claire and her peers had worn: pantsuits and simple sheaths with extra give in the middle. Things had certainly changed in twenty years.

The waiting room was pale yellow, with chairs covered in chilly green plastic and faux-wood tables topped with a tasteless supply of magazines. *Popular Mechanics* in a gynecologist’s waiting room? Claire wondered if Dr. Jenkins was fascinated by the complex workings of everything, not just women. Nevertheless, when she finally entered the inner sanctum that led to the doctor’s office, she wished she were back in the waiting area.

Millie, Dr. Jenkins’ nurse, a woman in her late fifties with startlingly auburn hair combed unsuccessfully to cover bits of pink scalp, greeted Claire with a cool professional smile. She handed her a plastic cup. “Just a few drops,” she called as Claire closed the door to the bathroom.

A few minutes later, blood pressure and temperature taken, pulse measured, dread scale confronted (“Hmmm, we’ve put on a little weight, haven’t we!” from Millie) Claire sat on a molded plastic chair, waiting to hear Dr. Jenkins shuffle down the hall. When he entered, slightly stooped and beginning to soften in the jowls, she noticed how the years of midnight deliveries had worn on him. He looked as if he hadn’t slept in weeks. Though his white coat crackled with starch, his posture exuded fatigue. His eyes were puffy and streaked. It had been nearly twenty years since Marco had summoned him to help wrinkled and goopy Stephen emerge from her womb; he had probably been in his early forties then. For a brief period during her first pregnancy she had thought him handsome, but now it was hard to imagine why. She remembered how Marco used to call it transference when she returned home from her early pre-natal visits waxing about Dr. Jenkins’ encouragement of her progress toward motherhood.

“Good to see you, Claire. How’ve you been? And how’s that husband of yours,” he glanced at the computer, “Marcus?”

“Marco,” she said, wondering why she was intimidated by the idea of calling Jenkins Dan, or even Doctor J, though he had always addressed her by her first name. Not that he had ever invited her to any greater degree of intimacy. Maybe it was a necessary attitude for physicians whose job it was to probe the most intimate areas of their patients.

Dr. Jenkins indulged her with neutral conversation for the requisite minute or two before she lost him to the computer. “Hmm.” The sound made her more uneasy than she already was. Why is it, she wondered, that nobody ever says *hmm you’re terrific*, or *hmm, what a good job you’ve done*, or *hmm you look wonderful*.

“You’re overdue for your checkup by almost a full year. At your age that’s not such a good idea.”

The man was overflowing with tact and sensitivity. Claire’s inner evolved voice said fuck off, it’s my body. But her outer wimp mumbled, “It’s been a busy year.”

He seemed fascinated while he perused her electronic record, as if it was a mystery and he couldn’t wait to find out whodunit. “Urine test’s fine, no problems,” he said. “Blood pressure’s good, too.”

Claire experienced a surge of kindergarten pride at her achievements. Maybe she could get a printout of the report and tape it to the refrigerator door where the kids’ drawings used to hang.

“Well, why don’t you put on a gown and we’ll take a look inside.” He offered a vague smile directed somewhere over her shoulder. She realized that he had not made true eye contact with her yet. Maybe Marco’s right, it’s time to change doctors, she thought, but knew she wouldn’t. She was addicted to the familiar and avoided changes in everything possible: dentist, hairdresser, supermarket, internet service. Whatever she could hold constant, she did. And if she switched doctors, she’d have to transfer her records, and that would mean explaining why. No, she supposed she would suffer this fool, perhaps not gladly, until one or the other of them died. Some liberated woman you are, she scolded herself as she struggled to tie the short strings of the faded floral gown.

In a few minutes the nurse returned and helped her climb onto the examining table.

“Let’s just slide our hips down a little further. That’s the girl! Comfy?”

Her voice made Claire feel like she'd eaten too much sugar. Grunting, she inched her chilly buttocks toward the edge of the examining table. The nurse adjusted a white sheet on top of her as if she were a piece of sculpture to be hidden from an over-eager public.

“Doctor says you haven’t been here for almost two years. Really important at your age.”

Whatever happened to female solidarity, Claire wondered, as she stared at the drawings on the ceiling of an embryo in different stages of development. They were the same pictures she had pondered with great interest throughout both of her pregnancies, touched up over the years, she supposed. They showed the path from a squiggly mush of egg and sperm to a homunculus that resembled her bald Uncle Jacob at the end of his life, finally to a full-fledged baby. She used to watch the progression of pictures with delight when she came in for pre-natal visits all those years ago. She would lie in this same position, her fingers caressing the taut membrane of skin that covered her distended belly, and note the baby’s progress along the guideposts of fetal development. “It looks like an anorexic shrimp,” she reported to Marco after her eight-week exam, then later, “It’s turned into a lobster.” The first time she went into hard labor she imagined it had become a killer whale, but when Dr. Jenkins placed goop-covered Stephen on the deflated marshmallow of her stomach, she knew that he was indeed a baby, and that her heart would never be the same.

That was a long time ago. There should be different illustrations for women at mid-life who come in to make sure their internal organs were not in malignant decline. Pictures of – what? Old lace? A still life with teacups? The nurse was carefully laying out instruments as if they were the tools of an artist. Claire smiled at an image of herself, covered

with only a sheet, lying on a scaffold close to the ceiling with the nurse handing her brushes so she could apply thick paint to wet plaster. The Michelangelo of the Middle Aged.

Like the technician at the Metropolitan Opera summoning James Levine with “Maestro to the pit,” the nurse opened the door slightly and called, “Ready, Doctor.”

Dr. Jenkins entered and pulled on a pair of thin white gloves. He moved to the side of the table and lifted the paper sheet away from Claire’s chest. His fingers began to palpate her breasts and the area under her arms. His face was totally inscrutable as she examined it for any flicker of concern. She thought of the scar that had run across her mother’s chest. She had been five years old when her mother had a mastectomy, and although her own chest was flat, she had fallen asleep for the next year with her hands on the place where one day her breasts would appear, as if to protect them from the intrusion that had invaded her mother’s body.

“They seem fine, no lumps.” The Lord giveth. “But of course we’ll go ahead with the mammogram,” he continued. “With your family history and at your age you should have one every year.” The Lord taketh away.

When she had gone for her first mammogram nine years ago, obedient to the stricture that at forty a woman should start to have annual breast x-rays, her hands had trembled when she filled out the family history section of the information sheet. Mother: breast cancer. Recurrence six years later with metastasis to the lungs. Died age 49. Father’s age at death 52. Cause of death: Accident.

The technician had tried to reassure her. “It’s just routine, dear, it doesn’t mean the doctor suspects anything. Just relax, there’s

nothing to it.” But she’d been stiff with terror. Like a gourmet chef preparing pressed duck, the technician lay first her left breast on the cold glass plate and brought the top of the monster instrument down on her flesh, then backed out of the room to avoid the silent splash of radiation. When she returned a few seconds later she turned Claire as if she were on a spit, then repeated the process with her right breast.

Dr. Jenkins’ voice brought her back from the memory of that isolation chamber where, in spite of her anxiety, the machine had regularly failed to find any sign of cells gone awry.

“Well, let’s take a look inside,” he said, as if he were about to lead a troop of boy scouts on a spelunking trip. He moved to the end of the table and perched on a low stool. The nurse, silent in the presence of The Master, hovered behind him.

Claire took deep breaths as first the icy speculum coated with thick lubricant, then Dr. Jenkins’ gloved fingers prodded places inside her that were unaccustomed to strange visitors. After two successful pregnancies and God knows how many internal exams this should be easy. It never was.

The doctor’s face, framed by her thighs, wore an expression of cool detachment. His eyes were focused on the wall behind her head as if a procedural diagram were taped there. She knew that nowadays medical training included touchy-feely sessions to help physicians tune in to their patients’ emotional needs during the few minutes insurance companies allowed for a visit. But Jenkins was old school. He had already mastered Advanced Detachment when he was a young doctor delivering her first baby. She had wanted to strangle him when he calmly informed her that what she felt wasn’t pain, only a little pressure. “Too soon for the epidural,” he’d said, so she had alternately

panted and moaned for the next four hours, Marco bringing her ice chips and trying to distract her with the Times crossword puzzle as he sweated by her side. Finally, like Moses delivering the tablets, Jenkins had brought in the anesthesiologist who rescued her from what felt like the jaws of hell prying open her body.

Now Jenkins' left hand pushed hard on her lower abdomen. "Little puffy there, having any trouble with fluid retention?" He glanced at her elevated ankles.

"No." Little balding there, she wanted to say, having any trouble with enzymes? She could have told him that in all likelihood the puffiness came from martinis with olives and Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey, but she wasn't up for a lecture on low-fat eating or the abstemious use of alcohol.

"Let's check the fit of your diaphragm," he said, opening the case she had given to the nurse earlier. He inserted the round disc and nodded. "No change." There was an embarrassing sucking sound when he retrieved it along with his Vaseline'd fingers, but he didn't register any reaction. Claire wondered if he thought she was trying to suction him back in. Removing the gloves, he scrubbed his hands. The nurse said, "Let's take our legs down."

Released from the stirrups, Claire was helped back into a sitting position, her legs dangling over the edge of the table like a child sitting in a grown-up's chair.

"Well," Jenkins said, "from the way your uterus looks, I'd guess that menopause is just around the corner. How old was your mother when she began?"

Look at my chart, dummy, it's all there. "She died before she started, I think. She was in her late forties."

Jenkins continued without any visible reaction. “There are a few things you should watch for. Any difficulty with lubrication?”

“No.” Lubrication. It sounded more like something you did to a tired car, or applied to treat a skin rash. Her mother’s form of sex education had specialized in euphemisms for body parts and intimate functions, words like tushy and wee wee and boom-booms. After her mother died, her grandmother, who had never raised a girl, had provided clinical reading material that seemed more like a plumbing manual. “Read it and then you’ll ask me questions.” She’d had dozens of questions that she never asked: why do people do it? What does it feel like? How does that big thing fit in? Even after all these years, the straightforward names of personal organs and activities still seemed detached and cool. She preferred pussy to vagina, cock to penis.

“Any hot flashes? Bouts of depression? Dry skin?”

No no no. He made a few keystrokes on the laptop as the nurse busied herself placing instruments in a wire basket. “Well, assuming the Pap smear comes back clean, I’ll see you next year, unless you start to have any trouble with menopause.” He tapped his nose. “Oh, and don’t think you can’t still get pregnant.” On that cautionary note he rose and said, “Have a good year” to an indeterminate corner of the room, and vanished through the door, the nurse tripping behind him like an obedient wife.

The way things look inside. Menopause. Although he had been examining her nether regions, it was her unguarded heart he had located with the instinct of a born killer. Menopause. She was now an older woman. As she pulled on her slacks she pictured her interior space as a mysterious ancient cavern filled with hoar frost and cobwebs. A cavern which once housed two temporary tenants, never to be

occupied again, except for Marco's decreasingly frequent visits to its entrance. She should be relieved that the exam was over, but instead she felt anxious and slightly depressed.

Driving home she noticed that a few trees were already beginning to turn. Too early, it's only the beginning of September, she thought. For most people in this town the calendar was established as much by the arrival and departure of students as it was by weather. You could tell they had landed by the stalled traffic at the intersection still known as the Octopus in spite of efforts to redesign it more efficiently, the longer lines at Wegmans and the bank, the difficulty getting into restaurants without reservations. But for the last couple of years the weather had been changing, and September was behaving oddly. Climate change, she supposed. What had Jenkins, that master of subtlety, said? The way things look inside. She imagined her internal organs turning dry and brown, as the leaves would before long.

THAT NIGHT CLAIRE HAD TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP. Her stomach was cramping slightly in the aftermath of the examination. Marco snored quietly, his back to her, his buttocks companionably nudging her thigh. When she had turned forty-nine in March, she'd known that it was the age at which her mother had died, but she had buried that awareness. Today's examination had uncovered a feeling that combined gratitude and vulnerability. She lay in the darkness and began to calculate: her mother had died in August 1979. She was forty-nine and five months, fourteen days. Claire used her fingers to count out her own age: she had outlived her by fifteen days.

Claire didn't know if this was a gift of time, or a warning to use it differently. What did she want to change? What about her life wasn't

working? What was around the corner and how much control would she have, anyway? Probably no more than her mother had had. Maybe the fact that she had lived longer than her mother didn't mean anything, was just happenstance. She lay still and checked to see if she felt different, the way a child does the morning of a birthday. She pushed away the approaching weepiness because she didn't want to wake Marco and try to explain why she was crying; she herself didn't understand why. Most of all, she wanted to talk to Maude. Marco once said, in that diagnostic tone of voice that made her want to scream, that because of the difference in their ages Maude was a surrogate mother. Claire hated that kind of simplification. "Why do you have to pathologize and label everything? Can't people of different generations be friends?"

But at that moment she longed to be wrapped in Maude's comforting arms with their soft, loose flesh. She'd have to wait for their regular visit on Sunday morning.