

THE MISTRESS OF WHOLESOME

A ONE-ACT PLAY

By

Jacob M. Appel

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CAST

3 FEMALE / 0 MALE

MARGARET, a cardiologist's wife (**F-late 30s**)

GWEN, a cardiologist's mistress (**F-30s**)

CONNIE CALLARD, an adoption agent (**F-20s**)

SETTING

The entire play takes place on the lower story of Margaret & Leland's upscale, Washington D.C. condominium: a living room with attached kitchenette. Sliding glass doors run along the back wall of the condo, opening onto a spacious patio; while most of the patio cannot be seen, one might consider placing a few potted plants behind the glass to remind the audience of what lies beyond. A front door opens at stage right. The living room is furnished in the modernist style (sofa, coffee table, Barcelona chairs, end table with lamp and telephone), but the space appears cold and austere, with few personal effects. It should mirror the state of Margaret and Leland's marriage. In one corner of the living room, a framed painting conceals a wall safe; alternatively, a free-standing safe is visible. The kitchenette appears immaculately clean and well-ordered, as pristine as a model kitchen in a showroom. As the play progresses, the condo slowly descends into chaos.

(Curtain rises: It is mid-afternoon. Gwen appears outside the sliding doors in a trench coat, carrying an oversized handbag, appearing both sexually alluring and world-weary—the sort of woman who has been around the block so many times, she has worn down the pavement. Gwen knocks on the glass. She waits, but nobody answers. She peers into the condo, holding her hand above her eyes like a visor. Then she tries the lock. Finally, she picks up a nearby shovel and bashes a hole in the glass, reaches inside and unlocks the door. She turns on the table lamps and admires the condo. Next, she enters the kitchen and rummages through the drawers until she finds a scissors. She leaves the drawers open and uses the scissors to sever the telephone lines in both the kitchen and living room. She looks at her watch, visibly impatient. Finally, she rifles through the refrigerator/freezer and removes a pint-sized container of ice cream. When she opens the lid to serve herself, jewelry pours out of the container. No ice cream! She returns to the refrigerator/freezer several times and removes additional food packages (a box of popsicles, a carton of cereal), but each contains only more jewelry. Gwen is glaring at the jewelry with mounting hunger and frustration when Margaret enters the condo through the front door. Margaret is the quintessential suburban matron, deeply concerned with appearances; her body clings desperately to its last vestiges of youth, while her soul is already well-entrenched in middle-age. All that Margaret's tableau lacks is a child following at her heels. Or possibly five. At first, Margaret does not notice Gwen. She removes her jacket and hangs it on a hook. When she does see Gwen, she tries to mask her concern.)

MARGARET

May I help you with something?

GWEN

You're out of ice cream.

MARGARET

Let me try that again: Who are you and what are you doing in my kitchen?

GWEN

Is that any way to treat a guest? Honestly, the least you could do is offer me a snack....

MARGARET

Do I know you?

GWEN

That's beside the point, isn't it? You have a house guest on the brink of keeling over from starvation. Most people would find me something to eat.

MARGARET

You're *not* my guest. You have to be *invited* to be a guest. If you were a guest—

GWEN

—I'd settle for a blueberry muffin and a cup of tea—

MARGARET

If you were a guest—someone I had *invited* into my home—I would certainly offer you a snack....a cup of tea, or even a cocktail, and an assortment of Italian pastries, and I'd ask after our mutual friends and acquaintances. But we don't have any mutual friends and acquaintances, because you're not my guest, because *I don't know you*....Do I?

GWEN

If you were *my* guest, I'd certainly offer *you* something.

MARGARET

My husband didn't bring you back here, did he?

(Shouting)

Leland! Goddamit, Leland! Get your philandering ass our here and explain yourself.

GWEN

I'm all alone....And for the record, if you *were* my guest, I wouldn't start accusing you of things before I'd even offered you a cup of tea and a blueberry muffin.

MARGARET

I'll bear that in mind. Now kindly explain what you're doing here.

GWEN

You should be thankful I'm not a burglar. Who still hides jewelry in the freezer? This is the twenty-first century. If I were a thief, that's the first place I'd look.

MARGARET

(Obviously lying)

Who would want these old things anyway? They're paste—every last one. Not worth a pint of ice cream.

GWEN

Then why hide them in the freezer?

MARGARET

Why hide them in the freezer....? I'm afraid that's none of your business....Now you have exactly ten seconds to account for your presence in my house or I'm going to telephone the police. Am I making myself clear?

GWEN

You wouldn't believe how famished I am. I always get hungry when I'm nervous. Do you really have Italian pastries?

(Gwen returns to the refrigerator and empties the contents haphazardly onto the countertop. She finds additional valuables—maybe gold watches, silver candlesticks, even stacks of currency—but still no food.)

MARGARET

(Her frustration increasing.)

For Christ's sake, this is not a soup kitchen. Could you please stop making a mess of my things? I'm expecting company.

(Margaret begins repacking the jewelry into the food cartons as Gwen continues to empty the cabinets.)

We had the cleaning lady in this morning....And now everything's ruined! Ruined!

(Margaret gives up repacking the jewelry, unable to keep up with Gwen's plundering.)

Goddammit! Would you mind telling me *how* you got in here?

GWEN

I picked the lock....

(Margaret notices the shattered glass. Now she is more visibly alarmed.)

MARGARET

So you *are* a burglar!

GWEN

Please calm down. I'm sorry about the door....

MARGARET

Do you know how much those panes cost? That's Italian glass!

GWEN

(Gwen topples pots and pans from the shelves.)

You don't even have any crackers or canned fruit. What would you do in an emergency?

If you were trapped here during an influenza pandemic or a nuclear attack. How would you eat?

MARGARET

This really is too much. My husband will be home soon....

GWEN

I thought you were going to phone the police.

MARGARET

He's a large man—a large, muscular man who always carries a concealed handgun.....

GWEN

There's no point in lying to me, Margaret. You're a terrible liar.

MARGARET

You're forcing my hand.....Ten...Nine...Eight....

(Gwen joins in the counting)

MARGARET & GWEN

Seven...Six...Five...

(Margaret stops counting and glares at Gwen.)

MARGARET

(Angrily, after a pause)

....One....Zero.

(Margaret reaches for the telephone; she attempts desperately to secure a dial tone.)

Operator? Operator?

GWEN

Don't bother. I already cut the lines.

MARGARET

You what?!

GWEN

It's not a big deal. They do it all the time in movies.

MARGARET

Very well. There's a donut shop on the corner.....I'm going to go get the police....

(Margaret retrieves her jacket.)

GWEN

I thought you were expecting company.

(Margaret realizes that if she leaves the apartment, she may miss her visitor. She returns the jacket to the hook.)

MARGARET

What do you want from me?

GWEN

From you? Nothing. But I do have bad news for you, Margaret....

MARGARET

What sort of bad news? And how do you know my name?

GWEN

Very bad news. Do you really want to know the truth?

MARGARET

If it means that you'll leave before my visitor shows up.

GWEN

Brace yourself for this....I'm your sister.

MARGARET

Fiddlesticks.

GWEN

No, really. I was born the year after you, but our mother couldn't handle two babies, so she put me up for adoption.....

MARGARET

That is complete and total bullshit.

GWEN

Listen to me, Margaret Claypool....Whether you like it or not, I'm your long lost baby sister and I tracked you down because I was recently diagnosed with a rare, often fatal genetic illness, and the odds are that you're suffering from it too....I felt a duty—a familial obligation—to warn you.

MARGARET

I need to sit down.

(Margaret sits down.)

I'm feeling a bit dizzy.

GWEN

Can I offer you a cocktail or an Italian pastry?

MARGARET

You're really *my sister*?

GWEN

No. That *was* complete bullshit. I just made that up to frighten you.

MARGARET

(Suddenly enraged.)

Enough already! I don't know who you are or what you want, but my husband will be here at any moment, and he's a "shoot now and ask questions later" kind of guy.

GWEN

Leland? Leland couldn't shoot a wild boar if it attacked him in his own bed. He's far too indecisive....

MARGARET

Since when are *you* an authority on *my* husband?

GWEN

I'm his mistress.

MARGARET

(Shocked, but determined to save face.)

Nonsense!....My husband is as faithful as a sheepdog.

GWEN

A moment ago he was a philandering ass.

MARGARET

That was just a figure of speech.....

GWEN

I've been sleeping with your husband for eleven years, Margaret. That's a lot more than a figure of speech.

MARGARET

Goodness.....Leland's mistress....

GWEN

Gwen Ermont....It's so good to finally meet you after all this time.

(Gwen extends her hand, but Margaret ignores it.)

I've heard *so* much about you....All good....Or *almost* all good. If it were *all* good, I suppose Leland wouldn't be sleeping with me....Anyway, if you don't mind my saying so, you're extremely fortunate to be married to a man who thinks so highly of you.

MARGARET

(Slowly recovering)

Leland's mistress? Why didn't you say so?....But you're so....

GWEN

You expected someone younger?

MARGARET

Yes....And prettier.

GWEN

That's not a pleasant thing to say to the woman you're sharing a husband with.

MARGARET

You really do have to leave. Immediately.

GWEN

I will. As soon as we've had a brief heart-to-heart chat.

(Gwen continues to remove food packages from shelves, periodically discovering more valuables. Still no food.)

Don't you have anything *at all* to eat in this house?

MARGARET

We order a lot of take-out.....Leland often won't come home until very late.

GWEN

Because he's detained at the hospital...?

MARGARET

(Refusing Gwen's bait)

That's the life of a cardiologist. Even with the sun down, hearts still need mending....

What kind of wife would I be if I begrudged him his time at the hospital?

(Margaret returns some jewelry to the freezer.)

Can you please stop making a wreck of things?

GWEN

Don't you have any leftovers stashed away somewhere? Or gourmet items? Gift-wrapped chocolates? Easter confections?

MARGARET

No. We don't. And you really *must* go. Come back tomorrow and I'll prepare you a steak dinner or ham-and-eggs or whatever you want—you can bash open the eiderdown pillows and pour condiments onto the bed linens for all I care—and we can talk until your

tongue swells up so large that you asphyxiate on it—but right now you'll have to leave. I have an extremely important appointment this afternoon. A *private* appointment.

GWEN

Aren't you even the slightest bit curious about my relationship with Leland? Don't you want to know how we met—or what he sees in me that he doesn't see in you?

MARGARET

Write me a note....Do you have stationery?

(Margaret stuffs a stack of stationery into Gwen's hands)

Here you go. My own monogrammed writing paper. From Veronica's on M Street. Why don't you write me a tell-all letter and bring it back tomorrow...? Or better yet, mail it...I'll get you a stamp.

(Margaret searches her purse for a stamp, but finds none.

Eventually, she deposits several coins on the kitchen table.)

Here's forty-one cents. That's the best I can do.

GWEN

(Gwen continues to ransack the cabinets for food while she speaks.)

It started the summer after I finished my acting degree at Vassar. We were sitting next to each other on a plane, flying back from Bridgeport, Connecticut. Leland had been rendezvousing with a pharmaceuticals salesgirl he'd met at a diabetes convention—I think you were at your aunt's funeral that weekend, if I remember it correctly—and I was returning from putting the finishing touches on the National Dwarf Hall of Fame.... That's what I do for a living. I'm a curator-for-hire. A museum mercenary.

MARGARET

Please listen to me. This is no ordinary visitor. I really must make a good impression.

GWEN

Tom Thumb was born in Bridgeport. You know, the tiny guy from the P. T. Barnum circus. As far as I'm concerned, it's as fitting a place for a Dwarf Hall of Fame as any, although—if you want get all technical about it—Thumb wasn't actually a dwarf. He was a midget.

MARGARET

This could be the most important appointment of my adult life. What can I do to convince you to leave?

GWEN

Small difference, if you ask me. But these little people get all worked up about these things....My point is that I started talking to your husband, and I fell for him so quickly that when he told me he was a cardiologist, I pretended to have a heart attack. Right there in the main cabin. And it worked, too. It's the only time in my life that my acting degree ever paid off....After we'd made an emergency landing in Philadelphia, Leland rode with me to the hospital in the ambulance....It was only later—once we'd fallen in love—that he admitted he knew I was faking. That's what I admire about Leland: He's the sort of man who lets you fake a heart attack for him.

MARGARET

I'm glad you and my husband are so happy together.

GWEN

But we're not happy. Not any more...

MARGARET

Then I'm sorry you and my husband aren't happy together.

GWEN

(Growing desperate.)

You have to help me. Please. I'm begging you.

MARGARET

How can *I* possibly help *you*?

GWEN

May I speak to you candidly: mistress to wife?

MARGARET

(Margaret sweeps up the broken window glass.)

I'm going to put all of my cards on the table: Leland and I are trying to adopt a baby. A social worker from the adoption agency will be arriving here in less than ten minutes to see if our home is fit for a child—to evaluate our parental suitability. She doesn't want to hear about how *you* met my husband.

GWEN

I think Leland is falling out of love with me. I'm afraid he's already fallen in love with another woman....

MARGARET

Look, I'm sure you're just imagining things. My husband doesn't have a cheating bone in his body—or at least not *that many* of them. But in any case, all of this is between you and Leland. I want absolutely nothing to do with it. I don't want to hear about it. I don't want to know about it.

GWEN

Please, Margaret. I'm not sure where else to turn....and even though this is the first time I've ever met you face to face, I guess I feel like we're old friends....I remember how I sat up beside the telephone past midnight when you had your gallbladder surgery, waiting for Leland to let me know that you were okay....and that time you sliced your finger open on the rusty faucet and you thought you'd contracted tetanus...

MARGARET

You know about all that?

GWEN

Leland tells me everything.

MARGARET

Well, Leland tells me nothing. Which is how I prefer it....And you and I are *not* old friends. This is *not* a social relationship....Wives do not have social relationships with their husband's mistresses—at least not if they're aware of it.

(A long pause.)

GWEN

Doesn't it bother you?

MARGARET

(Feigning ignorance)

Doesn't *what* bother me?

GWEN

That your husband thinks about *me* when he's having sex with *you*.

MARGARET

I thought he was thinking about a third woman when he has sex with both of us.

GWEN

How can you be so detached?

MARGARET

How can I *not* be? You don't think I realized a long time ago that Leland has been less than faithful. The wife always knows—even if she chooses not to admit it....Women who claim they're shocked when they discover that their husbands have other wives and children in different states are lying through their teeth....or they've tricked themselves into not knowing what they actually do know....Deep down they *always* know. They're just reluctant to tamper with the status quo, because they're afraid things might get worse....That they might end up with nothing at all....In any case, I gave up on controlling my husband's more unpleasant urges a long time ago....What I want now is a beautiful bouncing baby girl from China who looks absolutely nothing like her father.

Leland owes me that.

GWEN

There is no third woman. That's the worst part.

MARGARET

But you just said—

GWEN

It's *you*, Margaret. I think Leland has fallen back in love with *you*.

MARGARET

My husband? In love with *me*?

GWEN

It's hard to believe, isn't it? But when you started planning to adopt the baby, you put a lot of crazy ideas into his head. About reforming himself. About becoming a model parent and all that bullshit.

MARGARET

Did Leland really tell you that?

GWEN

You don't know what I've been going through, Margaret. Leland and I have been together for *eleven* years. That's a third of my life. And now he expects me to stand idly by while he throws everything away for some stranger's baby?

MARGARET

Wait a second—

GWEN

No, you wait a second! I've played fair by you all these years. I never asked Leland to leave you—I'm not that kind of woman. I respected what was yours, and I trusted that you'd respect what was mine. The way I thought about it was that we each had our own niche. Like different species of birds who share different portions of the same habitat. Leland wanted one woman who was sensuous and magnetic and exhilarating in bed....and another who kept her pearls in the freezer and used expressions like fiddlesticks....It all felt very mature, very civilized, almost French....You should be ashamed to leave me out in the cold like this! After all I've done for you! After all we've been through together!

MARGARET

I'm not doing anything to you. Is it my fault if Leland's had a change of heart?

GWEN

It's unfair, I tell you. Why should love be first-come, first-served? Like waiting in line for a sandwich at the deli. What right do you have? Do you really think you own him just because you started sleeping with him before I did? I love him *more* than you do. That's what should matter.

MARGARET

So what do you expect me to do? Leland's a grown adult. He's capable of making his own decisions. Honestly, I don't understand why you've come here.

GWEN

I'll tell you why. Because I want Leland to love me again....I *need* Leland to love me again. And you're going to find a way to make that happen.

MARGARET

How am I supposed to do that? I can't even get Leland to tuck in the shower curtain.

GWEN

You'll find a way. He *is* your husband.

(Gwen removes a musket from her handbag.)

And if you don't—Well, let's just say you will....

MARGARET

You're not really threatening to shoot me with *that*?

GWEN

You bet I am. But only if I have to....It allegedly belonged to Paul Revere. I borrowed it from Special Exhibits at the Smithsonian.

(She loads the musket with grapeshot and powder.)

As guns go, it may be not glamorous—but rest assured, it’s one-hundred percent functional. A woman like me doesn’t have much access to sophisticated weaponry on a daily basis. She’s got to take her arms where she finds them.

MARGARET

Let me get this straight: If I can’t convince my husband to fall back in love with you, you’re going to shoot me with a Revolutionary War musket.

GWEN

Right between the eyes. And then I’m going to shoot myself...If I can’t have Leland, nobody will.

MARGARET

Look, Gwen. I honestly wish I could help you. But you know how stubborn Leland can be...Once he’s made up his mind, there’s nothing to be done about it.

GWEN

Well, you’d better figure something out. I’m telling you, I’m desperate.

MARGARET

Leland’s going to be here any minute. I’ll talk to him...We can all sit down together sometime soon and hash this out.....

GWEN

Leland’s not coming.

MARGARET

Oh, he’ll be here. He wants this baby as much as I do....

GWEN

He can’t come.

MARGARET

What do you mean: 'He *can't* come'?

GWEN

He has a competing obligation.

MARGARET

What sort of 'competing obligation'?

GWEN

He's in the trunk of my car.....