

AUTUMN'S CHILD

BY TOM SMITH

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Characters

MOMMA 45, a strong Iowa farmwoman

CHLOE 24, her daughter

Time/Place

The present.

Momma and Chloe's house, Iowa.

AUTUMN'S CHILD

(Lights rise on MOMMA's home, a small farmhouse decorated simply and economically. MOMMA, 45, is at the table clipping coupons from the newspaper. It is a late October morning.)

MOMMA

That's right, Jack! It looks like there're some good sales this week. The Price Chopper has soup 2-for-1. Did you like that beef stew we had last week? I thought for canned soup it was pretty good. Not like mine, but it was sure easier just heating something up like that. Maybe I can stop and pick some up before I get Chloe.

(A man's unintelligible response is heard in the other room. SHE stops clipping coupons.)

Jack, now listen to me. Don't say a word when Chloe comes home this afternoon! I don't think she'll want to talk about it. So don't ask her anything about it, ok? Promise me, Jack.

(Another unintelligible response. MOMMA organizes her coupons.)

We can talk about it with her only when she's ready. And she may not be ready for some time. I hope her appetite is up. I haven't made that Springfield Chocolate Cake in years. Since she was twelve, I think. For her twelfth birthday, remember? Isn't it odd, Jack? For some reason we just stopped making cake in this house. Even for birthdays. We just stopped. Don't you think that's odd?

(SHE looks towards his room. Beat.)

Jack? Jack, are you sleeping, honey? I suppose you are. Lord knows it's a blessing, really: your being bedridden and all. Otherwise you'd be out here the minute Chloe gets home babying her. She just needs some time to...heal. Well, I'd better frost that cake.

(SHE exits into the kitchen, humming as SHE goes.)

(CHLOE, 24, enters the house. SHE is wearing a hospital gown with a very large man's jacket over it. SHE quietly shuts the door and looks

*into her jacket, in which lies a small bundle.
SHE rushes over to the phone, unplugs the cord
from the wall and quickly enters her bedroom.
MOMMA re-enters with a cake and a bowl of
frosting.)*

MOMMA

The cake turned out just perfect, Jack! It's all even on top and everything. It's going to be such a surprise! It'll be like she's 12 years old again. Like we never stopped making cakes in this house.

*(SHE sits at the kitchen table and begins to frost
the cake.)*

My mother made cakes all the time. After Daddy died she made a cake every year for his birthday and left it out for him. Brother always thought that was such an odd thing to do; he thought Momma was crazy. One year, he snuck downstairs and saw Momma drinking wine and staring at the candles on top of that cake. Then she started talking to Daddy, telling him what he missed that year! After a while Brother came and woke me up and we both sat at the top of the stairs listening to Momma tell Daddy how proud she was of us and how much she missed him. Then Brother sneezed and Momma caught us and slapped us both hard across the face. But it wasn't so bad. We knew she loved us: she told Daddy. Did I ever tell you that story, Jack?

(SHE finishes frosting the cake.)

I should bake more often, Jack, I really should. There's something calming about it. Something nice.

*(Slowly CHLOE enters the room. SHE has
changed into a simple dress.)*

CHLOE

Momma?

MOMMA

What? Good Lord, Chloe! What are you doing here?

CHLOE

I decided to come home.

MOMMA

But I was supposed to pick you up this afternoon! The doctor at the hospital said for me to come at four.

CHLOE

I left early. I didn't like there!

MOMMA

But nothing's ready! I'm not even out of my housedress yet! And your insurance forms: I was supposed to bring them this afternoon.

CHLOE

I took care of everything, Momma. We can mail the insurance forms to them later. Aren't you even glad to see me?

MOMMA

(Hugging her.)

Of course I am, honey. I missed you so much this past week. It's been deathly quiet without you.

CHLOE

I missed you too, Momma. And Daddy.

MOMMA

Jack? Jack, Chloe's here!

(There is no response.)

CHLOE

Is he sleeping?

MOMMA

He gets so tired these days.

CHLOE

I'll talk to him later. I really missed you, Momma.

MOMMA

Everyone asked about you. I saw Jeremy Karnes at the market and he asked me to send you his regards. I can't believe he's still working for his father. That boy needs to cut those strings.

CHLOE

Did you tell him what happened?

MOMMA

(Ignoring her.)

I bought a very pretty wreath outside of the Price Chopper yesterday. It's an autumn wreath, made of branches. With Indian corn on it. And orange ribbon. I haven't gotten around to putting it on the front door yet, but I think it will look so nice.

CHLOE

Momma, did you say anything to—

MOMMA

I finally got out to the garden to pull up most of that squash. I don't know when that garden will stop producing. We are going to have squash for months.

CHLOE

Please, Momma...

MOMMA

I took Daddy some dinner last night but he wasn't hungry. His appetite's down a bit. It scares me sometimes...

CHLOE

It's ok, Momma! You don't have to pretend it didn't happen! We can talk about it...

MOMMA

About what, darling?

CHLOE

...The baby, Momma. We can talk about the baby.

MOMMA

Oh, Chloe, you know I wanted to come see you when...I heard the news. But I had to be here for Daddy.

CHLOE

Does Kenny Williams still practice law?

MOMMA

Sure, baby. But he's in Chicago now, remember? He moved there last month.

CHLOE

Do you have his new phone number?

MOMMA

No, but I suppose I could get it from his mother. Why?

CHLOE

I want to sue the hospital.

MOMMA

Sue the—? What are you talking about?

CHLOE

It wasn't right, Momma. It wasn't right what they did to my baby.

MOMMA

Let's not talk about all this now, ok, honey?

CHLOE

We have to talk about it! We have to, Momma!

MOMMA

All right, baby, all right. We do have to talk about it, but not right now. We'll talk about it all in a few days. All right? When you're feeling better.

CHLOE

But shouldn't we go ahead and—

MOMMA

Later, Chloe, all right? For me? For my sake? Just let me enjoy the fact that you're back home.

CHLOE

All right, Momma.

MOMMA

That's my girl.

(Reaches for the cake.)

This was supposed to be a surprise for after dinner, but...

CHLOE

Oh, Momma, a cake! With marshmallow frosting!

MOMMA

It's Springfield Chocolate Cake. There were supposed to be little flower sprinkles on top but I hadn't gotten to the market yet today.

CHLOE

I haven't had this since I was, what, eleven or twelve?

MOMMA

I hope you still like it!

CHLOE

It's perfect. It's just— Thank you!

MOMMA

Let's have some right now! I know we should wait, but let's treat ourselves! I'll get some plates.

CHLOE

I'll go.

MOMMA

Nonsense; sit down!

CHLOE

(Stopping MOMMA from going into the kitchen.)

I'm ok, Momma. Really.

MOMMA

All right. Thank you, baby.

(CHLOE exits into the kitchen.)

It's getting cold again, isn't it? I can't believe it'll be winter soon. With that Indian summer, autumn has just flown by. They said on the news this morning that we should be getting frost any day now. You can feel it in the air this morning, can't you? The first hint of change. I had to put on a sweater.

CHLOE *(Off, laughing.)*

You're always cold!

MOMMA

I know. But you're just like me; don't say you aren't! There's that draft again. Remind me to call somebody to come out and take a look at that before it gets too cold. You sure you're not chilly, honey?

CHLOE (*Off.*)

I'm fine. Do you think Daddy would like some cake too?

MOMMA

Maybe in a bit. I can't believe you don't feel this draft. It's like a ghost in here.

(SHE crosses and enters CHLOE'S room.)

I'm going to get you a sweater just in case.

CHLOE

(Running out of the kitchen.)

Momma, don't go in my room! Don't!

MOMMA

(Re-enters carrying a baby wrapped up in a thick blanket.)

Chloe? Chloe, what is this?

(SHE starts to push the blanket away from the baby's face. CHLOE rushes over, takes the baby and re-enters her room.)

Answer me, Chloe!

CHLOE

(Slowly re-entering.)

That's...my baby.

MOMMA

Your— Chloe, the doctor told me about your baby.

CHLOE

They're all so stupid there! That's why I need to call Kenny Williams.

MOMMA

Honey, the doctor told me your baby...died.

CHLOE

He was wrong! You can see that as plain as day! They told me she was dead but she wasn't!

MOMMA

What are you talking about? Doctors aren't wrong about things like that.

CHLOE

Momma, don't you see? My baby was alive! She is alive! Oh, they were all so stupid at that hospital. They wouldn't let me hold her, love her.

MOMMA

Honey, I don't understand. What are you—

CHLOE

—It was so quiet...

MOMMA

I don't understand what you're telling me!

CHLOE

...so quiet, after the final push. No one said a word. Then, suddenly, the doctor begins working real fast. "What is it? What's happening?" A nurse comes over and sponges my forehead. "Why is it so quiet?" The doctor looks at me and says, "I'm sorry. There was no way for us to know." And he squeezes my hand, and walks across the room. I look up and see the nurse crying. I see another nurse drying the blood off my baby with a towel. Why am I crying but my baby isn't? "Why isn't my baby crying?"

(Beat.)

It never occurred to me she was dead.

(Beat.)

The doctor tells me the umbilical cord was wrapped too tight around her neck for too long; the blood couldn't reach her brain. She strangled herself inside of me and she was...dead. Then he tells me they would send someone up to talk to me and he leaves the room. I tried to sit up to look at my baby but the nurse held me down and said I needed to wait for the afterbirth.

MOMMA

Oh my Lord...! Chloe—

CHLOE

They took my baby away. They put her inside a metal tub and carried her out of the room. “Don’t you throw away my baby! Don’t you dare throw away my baby! Just let me hold her and everything will be all right! Just let me hold her!” Then I felt a needle in my arm and I woke up two hours later. When the psychologist came to see me I didn’t say a word. I kept quiet, like after the final push.

MOMMA

My God! Oh, my poor baby!

CHLOE

They threw my baby away! Like she was trash!

(Beat.)

I only thank God I was able to find her again.

(Pause.)

MOMMA

...What?

CHLOE

She was in the morgue. The morgue, Momma! In a drawer marked “Dead at Birth.”

MOMMA

I— Jack? Jack!

CHLOE

Shh! Listen to me, Momma. Listen to the miracle! I took my baby from the drawer, and I held her close against my heart. I knew she was breathing but they just couldn’t tell. She was breathing too delicately. I kissed her forehead. Did you see her hair? It’s white blonde. Angel hair. Did you see?

MOMMA

No. The blanket was so thick...

CHLOE

There's a little tag on her wrist with "Baby Girl" written on it. Momma, how can you be loved without a name? I take the tag off and I look down and I say "I name you Angela." It means angel. And suddenly she moves a bit. "Angela," I say real soft, "It's your momma. You can breathe now. No one will ever take you away from me again. You can live because I love you!" And then—oh, Momma!—Angela started to cry. It was music! Beautiful music! It was like I tried to tell the doctors: life can't happen unless there's love. And she hadn't known any love yet. She cried so loud and so strong that I had to take her out of the hospital. If they heard her they would have taken Angela away from me again.

MOMMA

Chloe... Oh God!

CHLOE

They just don't want to believe what love can do! It did what medicine couldn't! It gave life to Angela!

MOMMA

(Collecting herself.)

Honey, why don't you go wake Daddy? Tell him all about Angela. I'm sure he's anxious to hear how you are. He was very worried about you.

CHLOE

Alright, Momma. Come find me if she cries, alright? She'll be hungry when she wakes up.

(SHE exits into DADDY's room.)

MOMMA

(Quickly rushes to the phone, noticing it has been unplugged. Stifling a small cry, SHE plugs it back in and dials.)

Dr. Holland, please. Tell him it's an emergency.

(Beat.)

Hello, Dr. Holland? This is Myra Reynolds. This morning, my— Excuse me? Yes, Chloe's mother.

(Beat.)

No, she's not. Why?

(Beat.)

What?

(Beat.)

Did anyone actually see her take this other woman's baby? It sounds as if you—

(Beat.)

I see. Dr. Holland, please listen very closely to me. The baby is here. She's very safe. Chloe is here and...she's not well. Losing her baby has—it's hurt her, deep inside. I don't want the police to come. Chloe'll do something crazy; I just know she will. Please, give me one hour. Chloe and I will come back to the hospital with the baby together. If we don't, then the police can come.

(Beat.)

I realize that, but she's frantic. She thinks the baby is hers. If the police show up here there's no telling what she'll do. For the sake of the baby, please let me bring them to you. Please, Dr. Holland!

(Beat.)

One hour. You have my word. God bless you.

(SHE hangs up and begins to cry. SHE quickly composes herself and starts to cross towards CHLOE's room.)

CHLOE

(Entering.)

I thought I heard Angela. Is she awake?

MOMMA

No, honey, it was just me.

CHLOE

What's wrong, Momma?

MOMMA

I was just thinking about how awful it all was: your experience at the hospital. I should have been there...

CHLOE

I know. But like you said, there was no one else to take care of Daddy. He's looking a little better today.

MOMMA

Is he? I'm not sure I can tell anymore...

CHLOE

I wasn't a very good conversationalist: he fell back asleep a few minutes after I started talking to him!

MOMMA

We'll bring him some cake when he wakes up.

CHLOE

I saw all the squash on the counter when I was getting the plates.

MOMMA

It's this Indian summer: those plants just keep producing!

CHLOE

It's like we're skipping autumn all-together.

MOMMA

Good thing frost is coming. That'll stop everything.

CHLOE

It doesn't seem right, though, does it? Leaves are gonna fall before they even stopped turning colors.

MOMMA

That's the way it is sometimes. Seasons doesn't always change the way they're supposed to.

CHLOE

It's not right. Things shouldn't be dying yet. It's too early!

MOMMA

Chloe?

CHLOE

Not when they haven't had the chance to grow! To develop!

MOMMA

Chloe!

CHLOE

It's not fair!

(SHE quietly starts to cry.)

...it's not fair...

MOMMA

Oh, baby. I know this has all been very, very hard on you.

(SHE pulls her close.)

I want you to know how much I love you, Chloe.

CHLOE

I love you too, Momma.

MOMMA

You're my world.

(SHE breaks the embrace.)

You know, I was going to pick up some groceries today before I went to get you. Let's get Angela and go shopping together, just us girls. Alright?

CHLOE

I don't think that's a good idea, Momma. It's awfully cold outside.

MOMMA

Nonsense! We'll keep Angela bundled up in her blanket. It's a thick blanket. Go on.

CHLOE

No, Momma, not right now. Angela's still sleeping.

MOMMA

Chloe, please.

CHLOE

No, Momma.

MOMMA

Just do as I say.

CHLOE

No.

MOMMA

I'm not going to ask again!

CHLOE

Momma, why are you acting like this?

MOMMA

Do as I say!

CHLOE

No! I said no! Angela's my baby and—

MOMMA

She is not your baby!

CHLOE

...What did you say?

MOMMA

Angela is not your baby! I called the hospital. I talked to Dr. Holland.

CHLOE

When?

MOMMA

While you were in with Daddy.

CHLOE

They're all crazy there! They tried to kill Angela!

MOMMA

Nobody tried to kill Angela! Angela died at birth. She had her cord tied around her neck and she was born dead. You didn't find her in the morgue. You didn't bring her back to life! You went into the nursery and took someone else's baby! And the police know and they will come here and arrest you unless we bring the baby back right away.

CHLOE

You're crazy! You're just like them!

MOMMA

Go get Angela!

CHLOE

No! She's mine! You don't know what you're talking about. I had to go to the morgue...

MOMMA

(Goes towards bedroom.)

Enough of this!

CHLOE

(Rushes to doorway and pushes MOMMA back.)

Angela is my baby! I gave her a name and I gave her life. That's how it happened, Momma. They lied to you to turn you against me. So we couldn't sue them. They don't want to admit they were wrong! Don't you see?

MOMMA

Chloe, you're hurt and you don't know the truth anymore.

CHLOE

The truth that my baby was dead at birth? That it strangled itself rather than be born to a loving mother? How can you believe that?

MOMMA

You took another baby because you wanted it to be Angela. But it isn't.

CHLOE

How can you say this to me? I'm your own flesh and blood!

MOMMA

You think Angela is alive but she's still back there. In that morgue. In that drawer. Somewhere deep inside you must know that!

CHLOE

(Plugging her ears.)

Lies!

MOMMA

Angela's dead! I wish to God she wasn't, but she is. You have to give her up! Otherwise she can't go on to heaven; she can never be at peace.

CHLOE

...Like Daddy?

MOMMA

What?

CHLOE

You want to talk about truths, *the* truth. All right, let's talk about Daddy.

MOMMA

Shh! You'll wake him up. He gets very upset—

CHLOE

I DON'T CARE! HE CAN'T HEAR ME! HE'S DEAD, MOMMA! Daddy died 12 years ago.
On my twelfth birthday.

MOMMA

You've really gone over the edge now, Chloe! Your father is asleep in his room!

CHLOE

You talk to him to keep him alive. You pretend he is alive. But he's not! There's nothing in that room but an old bed. Nothing at all!

MOMMA

You shut your mouth! How dare you!

CHLOE

Momma! *You* know. You know *the truth*: life doesn't exist without love. And it can't end if there still is love.

MOMMA

Jack?

CHLOE

We know. Somehow, you and I both know. It's our truth, Momma. And no one can take it away from us.

MOMMA

Chloe— I... I...

CHLOE

For twelve years I have never asked you to give up your truth, Momma. Don't ask me to give up mine.

(Long pause.)

MOMMA

But they...the police—

CHLOE

Are they going to come and take Angela away?

MOMMA

Yes.

CHLOE

When?

MOMMA

I don't know. I told them I'd bring you back to the hospital within the hour.

CHLOE

We've got to move quickly then.

(SHE goes into her room. Off.)

When they come, tell them I went into town with Angela. That will buy me more time.

MOMMA

(Whispering.)

Jack...?

CHLOE *(Off.)*

I won't call. Not for a while. Not until I know we're safe and they won't hurt Angela.

MOMMA

...Oh God, Jack, I'm so sorry...

CHLOE *(Off.)*

I'm leaving most of my things here so they won't think I've run off for good.

MOMMA

...I never wanted to say goodbye...

CHLOE

(Entering the room with the baby and a small bag.)

Tell them I left an hour ago. They'll look around town for a while and then—

(The phone rings.)

Don't answer it.

MOMMA

I've got to, honey. What if it's the police? They'll come out here...

CHLOE

I'll call you when I can. I love you, Momma.

(Starts to exit.)

Please don't tell Daddy what I said about him, alright? I don't want him to be mad at me.

(SHE exits.)

MOMMA

(Answering the phone.)

Hello?

(Beat.)

But I don't understand! How—?

(Beat.)

But she didn't take the baby: Chloe did! She still has the baby with her!

(Beat.)

But if that nurse took her, then whose baby is—?

(Slowly it dawns on her that Chloe's baby is really the stillbirth. SHE hangs up the phone. SHE rushes to the door, but then stops suddenly. SHE slowly crosses back into the room, looking frightened and lost. SHE tries to speak, but her throat catches. Finally, in a raspy voice:)

Jack...

(Sitting at the table.)

I've got to get to the store today. We're running low on that canned stew you like so much. I think the Price Chopper is still carrying it, but you never know these days. Things change so quickly sometimes. Maybe I'll pick up some buttermilk when I'm at the store and make some biscuits. Would you like that? Jack, are you awake?

(No reply.)

I can't hear you, honey. Would you like me to make you some biscuits tonight?

(No reply. She looks frightened.)

Jack?

(SHE rises and slowly crosses to the room, unwilling to enter it.)

JACK?

(SHE slowly looks inside the room.)

JACK!?!

END OF PLAY.