

Martha Patterson - A Constant Man

CAST OF CHARACTERS

JOHNNY A seven-year-old boy who ages throughout the play, until he is in his late 40s

MOTHER His mother, ages from 30s to 60s

SCENE: In the beginning, a car, which may be indicated by chairs.

TIME: The present.

Synopsis: As he ages, Johnny comes to grips with his mother's dementia and her anxieties about her marriage.

Scene 1

(In a car. JOHNNY is seven years old. MOTHER is in her 30s.)

JOHNNY

Where are we going, Mommy?

MOTHER

I don't know.

JOHNNY

But where are we going?

(Pauses.)

Why did you wake me up to get in the car?

(Pauses.)

MOTHER

Your father has a new girlfriend.

JOHNNY

He does?

MOTHER

Yes.

JOHNNY

Since when?

MOTHER

I don't know. Since last night. Stop asking questions.

JOHNNY

But who is she?

MOTHER

I don't know. Stephanie something-or-other.

JOHNNY

Will I like her?

MOTHER

I hope not.

JOHNNY

Do you like her?

MOTHER

Who are you kidding? I haven't even met her.

JOHNNY

But do you think you'd like her if you met her?

MOTHER (Pauses.)

That's a really dumb question, kid.

(Pauses.)

You're smart. You figure it out.

JOHNNY

You mean you don't like her.

MOTHER

Yes, that's exactly what I mean.

JOHNNY

Well, are we ever going back home?

MOTHER

That remains to be seen.

JOHNNY

But where are we going now?

MOTHER

I said, stop asking questions.

JOHNNY

But where?

MOTHER

I don't know. The country, maybe. Maybe we'll stay at an inn.
Maybe we'll drive all day, up to Maine, to your grandparents'.

JOHNNY

That would be fun.

(Pauses.)

Mommy?

MOTHER

Yes?

JOHNNY

Will I ever see Daddy again?

MOTHER

That's the million-dollar question.

JOHNNY

But I will, won't I?

MOTHER

Yes.

JOHNNY

That's good.

MOTHER

Yes.

JOHNNY

Because I love Daddy.

MOTHER

All right. That's it. We're turning around and going home.

JOHNNY

What for? What about Grandma and Grandpa's?

(Lights go down.)

Scene 2

(MOTHER and JOHNNY are on a train ten years later. JOHNNY is now seventeen.)

MOTHER

God, I wish it would stop raining. I can hardly see a thing out this window.

(Pauses.)

Are you looking forward to seeing the campus? You know, you might be spending the next four years at this place.

JOHNNY

Yes.

MOTHER

Well?

JOHNNY

I said yes.

MOTHER

You don't sound too excited.

JOHNNY

Well, I haven't seen it yet.

MOTHER

Yes, but it's a good school and it would make your father and I very proud if you went there.

(Pauses.)

You can do anything, you know. You could be an architect, an astronaut. There's nothing you can't do.

JOHNNY

I know. Mom?

MOTHER

What?

JOHNNY

Remember the trip we took when I was seven and you ran away from Dad?

MOTHER

I didn't run away. We went back, remember?

JOHNNY

And you never got divorced.

MOTHER

No.

JOHNNY

Why not?

MOTHER

Because I realized I was better off with him than without him.

JOHNNY

And you loved him?

(There is a loud crash.)

MOTHER

Jesus Christ! What was that?

JOHNNY

The train stopped.

MOTHER

Did we hit something?

JOHNNY

I don't know. Could've been a cow.

MOTHER

A cow?

JOHNNY

Well, we're in the country. There are cows in the fields.

MOTHER

Great. Now the lights are out. Complete darkness.

JOHNNY

We didn't get hurt.

MOTHER

Thank God.

JOHNNY

Mom, you're too pessimistic. We'll get there eventually.

MOTHER

What are you talking about? This is a major inconvenience.

JOHNNY

Want me to get you a cheese sandwich?

MOTHER

The club car's probably closed.

JOHNNY

Mom, I'm glad you didn't leave Dad.

MOTHER

Well, I could have, you know.

JOHNNY

Yeah, but I'm glad you didn't. He used to play catch with me in the backyard.

MOTHER

So am I. Glad. He's paying your tuition for college.

JOHNNY

Yeah, but I know he really loves you. I mean, really. Because when we drove back home that day he had tears in his eyes when we walked in the door.

MOTHER

Good. I didn't notice.

JOHNNY

Well, I did. And he never cheated on you again.

MOTHER

How do you know?

JOHNNY

I just do. It was a one-time thing.

MOTHER

Well, I guess it was.

JOHNNY

But you never had any more kids.

MOTHER

One was enough.

JOHNNY

Because it's too much trouble?

MOTHER

No, because it's too expensive.

(Pauses.)

Just remember. You can do anything you want, Johnny.

(Lights go down.)

Scene 3

(20 years later. JOHNNY is 37, MOTHER is 60. The scene is in a room in her home.)

JOHNNY

When you called I was worried. Are you sick?

MOTHER

No.

JOHNNY

Then what? You said it was urgent that I come over.

MOTHER

When your father died I had no idea what his assets were. I thought he'd leave me something.

JOHNNY

He didn't?

MOTHER

He left nothing. He was nearly bankrupt. Spent it all.

JOHNNY

I'll help you, Mom. I have a good job.

MOTHER

I know. Thank God for that PhD. But that's not the worst of it.

JOHNNY

Well?

MOTHER

It's what he spent the money on.

JOHNNY

On what?

MOTHER

I found the receipts. He kept an apartment in the next town for years for that woman of his. All those years. I had no idea.

JOHNNY

Mom, you're imagining things. He never saw her again.

MOTHER

He did. I found the proof.

JOHNNY

Mom, are you taking your medication?

MOTHER

None of your business.

JOHNNY

It's important. Your doctor said so. And he doesn't want you to have alcohol.

MOTHER

There's nothing wrong with me a little drink can't fix.

JOHNNY

You drink too much. Ever since Dad died. He never cheated on you again, I'm sure of it, after that one time.

MOTHER

Oh, yes he did.

JOHNNY

Ma -

MOTHER

Just wondering. Did you come for dinner?

JOHNNY

No. Only for a visit.

MOTHER

Because I didn't cook anything.

JOHNNY

I didn't expect you to.

MOTHER

Hm. You were a brilliant child, Johnny. All your teachers said so.

JOHNNY

Thanks, Ma.

MOTHER

You could have done anything. You ended up a professor.

JOHNNY

I like teaching.

MOTHER

But you don't believe me that your father kept seeing that woman.

JOHNNY

No.

MOTHER

Then what are those receipts for?

JOHNNY

Ma, they're probably the rental for his real estate office. He paid a high rent. And you know the company went through a bad spell for a while. You imagine a lot of things, you know that?

MOTHER

Maybe.

JOHNNY

Now, will you admit you're imagining things about Dad?

MOTHER

Maybe. Do you want dinner?

JOHNNY

You didn't cook anything.

MOTHER

I thought I peeled some potatoes. Or was that yesterday?

JOHNNY

I'm leaving now, Ma.

(He gets up.)

MOTHER

I should have put a roast in the oven.

JOHNNY

I'm not here to eat.

MOTHER

Next time.

JOHNNY

Next time.

(He leans over and kisses her cheek.)

(Lights go down on Scene 3.)

Scene 4

(Five years later. JOHNNY is 42. At a nursing home. He and his mother are seated.)

JOHNNY

Are they taking good care of you here?

MOTHER

It's all right.

JOHNNY

I want you to be comfortable.

MOTHER

You should have brought me flowers.

JOHNNY

Sometimes I do.

MOTHER

You should have brought your wife, too.

JOHNNY

Hm?

MOTHER

Your wife.

JOHNNY

I don't have a wife, Ma.

MOTHER

You do.

JOHNNY

No.

MOTHER

Why do you lie to me? I went to your wedding. Didn't I?

JOHNNY

All right, I had a wife.

MOTHER

Wasn't she lovely?

JOHNNY

Who?

MOTHER

Your wife.

JOHNNY

Oh. Yes. Yes, I guess she was.

MOTHER

But she cheated on you.

JOHNNY

What?

MOTHER

Just like my husband.

JOHNNY

I don't think so.

MOTHER

Yes. ...Johnny.

JOHNNY

Huh?

MOTHER

What was the name of that woman who lived next to us?

JOHNNY

When?

MOTHER

A long time ago. I can't remember her name.

JOHNNY

I don't either.

MOTHER

The one who wore short skirts.

JOHNNY

There wasn't any woman like that.

MOTHER

Sonya. Or Susan. Or Sadie, or something.

JOHNNY

Next door?

MOTHER

They were neighbors. Her husband had an affair, too.

JOHNNY

Ma –

MOTHER

I knew it. I just knew. He always came home late.

JOHNNY

I don't know who you're talking about. The man next door was in sales. He traveled.

MOTHER (She laughs derisively.)

A traveling salesman?

JOHNNY

I guess so.

MOTHER

That's how he got away with it.

JOHNNY

With what?

MOTHER

The cheating.

JOHNNY

Aw, Jesus, Ma –

MOTHER

What was her name?

JOHNNY

Who?

MOTHER

His wife.

JOHNNY

I don't think he had one.

MOTHER

And what was the name of the man who lived down the street
who took care of our washing machine?

JOHNNY

The plumber?

MOTHER

He had a wife, too.

JOHNNY

I don't remember.

MOTHER

What was his name?

JOHNNY

Patrick, or Perkins, or something.

MOTHER

The plumber. What was his name?

JOHNNY

Jesus, Ma, you keep asking the same questions over and over
again. I don't remember the guy's name. Or Sadie's name.

MOTHER

Our neighbor was Sadie?

JOHNNY

I don't know. You said that might have been her name.

MOTHER

I think it was Susan.

JOHNNY

I have no clue.

MOTHER

I'm hungry.

JOHNNY

You just had lunch.

MOTHER

I didn't touch it.

JOHNNY

I'll tell one of the nurses.

MOTHER

Tell Ruth. She's nice. She combs my hair.

JOHNNY

I'll tell Ruth.

MOTHER

I like the pineapple upside-down cake here.

JOHNNY

I'll let them know.

MOTHER

Didn't you tell me something about Safeway burning down?

JOHNNY

Yes. Last month.

MOTHER

I thought it was only a few days ago.

JOHNNY

No. I'm not sure, it happened a month or so ago.

MOTHER

Someone set it on fire?

JOHNNY

No. I told you. It was an electrical fire.

MOTHER

You didn't tell me that.

JOHNNY

I did. You forgot.

MOTHER

All this time I thought it was teenagers.

JOHNNY

It wasn't.

MOTHER

You lied to me. About my store. The store I shopped at.

JOHNNY

Ma –

MOTHER

Johnny. Did it burn to the ground?

JOHNNY

You just asked me that.

MOTHER

And I think Susan worked there.

JOHNNY

Susan who?

MOTHER

That woman.

JOHNNY

Ma –

MOTHER

I'm glad you came today.

JOHNNY

I am, too.

MOTHER

Thank you for the flowers.

JOHNNY

I didn't bring any. Next time I will.

MOTHER

It's been years since I've seen you.

JOHNNY

It's been a week.

(Pauses.)

Forget it.

MOTHER

You don't come often enough.

JOHNNY

Ma –

MOTHER

Thank you for the flowers, anyway.

JOHNNY

(Leans over and kisses her on the cheek.)

Bye, Ma.

(Lights go down.)

Scene 5

_____(Two months later. JOHNNY is in his car talking on a cell phone.)

JOHNNY

When you say it's non-specific, does that mean reversible?

...Oh. They're two different things? ...Because it seems reversible to me. ...Only ten percent are? ...Well, you're a doctor, you'd know. ...I just thought, since she fell down a flight of stairs when she was 63, maybe it was reversible. I mean, I thought maybe the fall caused a brain injury, but that at some point she could recover. ...Uh-huh.

...Well, it's very frustrating. She doesn't know what month it is or even what year it is sometimes. I'm beginning to wonder if she knows who I am. ...Well, could she ever be a danger to herself? ...Probably not.

That's good. But she does get angry suddenly. ...It's called a catastrophic reaction? ...Listen, listen to me – she was always kind of that way anyway. No need to make more out of it than it is. ...Uh-huh.

...Uh-huh. ...Look, can you just make sure she's comfortable? I want her to have food she likes and some company, someone to talk to.

...She's got a lot of anxiety about my father. ...No, he's dead. She thinks he was always unfaithful. ...Paranoia can develop in some patients? Well, she believed it most of her married life. She was on risperidone for years. ...Look, I'll probably meet you next week. We can talk then. ...Thanks. Appreciate it.

(He disconnects his phone.)

(Lights go down.)

Scene 6

(Five years later. JOHNNY is 47. He is in a hearse on his way to his mother's funeral, in tears, and he has a letter in his hand. He talks to himself.)

JOHNNY

Mom, you were the greatest. Always talking me up to myself, telling me I could do anything. Even in this letter. But you lost your mind. When did it start? With Dad? He never fooled around after that one time. I don't think he did. You lost your mind. When did it begin? The earliest seeds of it? In your thirties? Your forties? I'll never know. The doctors said it was early onset. And the whole thing with Dad. The affair you thought he kept having..... He never did. I'm sure of it. You were distrustful. You always made a big deal out of everything.

(Pauses.)

It wasn't his fault. Even if he did cheat. Not altogether. You lacked forgiveness, Mom. You always carried some kind of bitterness around with you.

(Pauses.)

Weren't you proud when I graduated from college? At least I can be happy for that. I'm sorry I never made you a grandmother.

(JOHNNY bites his nails.)

That woman he saw once. Stephanie. The receipts. You really believed he kept it going. Well, your doctor said you needed the meds. Delusional without them, he said.

(Pauses.)

And those nursing home visits! Jesus! You kept asking the same questions, over and over and over again. How much can a person take?

(Pauses.)

You know what I think, Ma? I think you were a very fragile woman. All your life. Very insecure.

(JOHNNY takes a breath.)

Yes, that's it. You were a very fragile woman.

(He reads from her letter. MOTHER'S voice is heard in a ghostly way.)

MOTHER'S VOICE

You were wrong about me, Johnny. Smart, smart, smart, but lacking perception. I was strong. I coped, despite all evidence to the contrary. You were just too young to realize it. And I recovered from your father's early affair. I forgave it, until I found out it had gone on longer than I'd thought. And you know something? What a grown child thinks about these things is a mystery to me. How you still loved your father, after I told you, and after he had died. You still wanted me to

love his memory. But I couldn't. I could only put up with it. And the main thing is, I always did love you. Remember me, Johnny, for that, as the woman who loved you when she couldn't love her husband anymore.

(Pauses and her voice becomes harsher.)

You should have visited more often.

(Pauses.)

I remember your father.

(Suddenly her voice gets raspy and twisted and hostile.)

A rat! I knew! Not all the sons in the world could have hidden it from me!

(Her voice becomes calm again.)

But I loved you. And I was strong. I want you to believe that. It takes a lot to stay with an inconstant man. So remember that some day if you suffer the indignity of staying with someone you no longer love.

It's like looking out of the window of a train in a downpour. You're going somewhere, but there's no light in sight, and no end in view to the darkness, just the steady thudding of the rain against the window, like hearing your heartbeat at night when you wonder if he's ever coming home. An inconstant man. That was your father, Johnny.

(Pauses and her voice becomes creepy.)

I hope you'll forgive me for telling you.

(JOHNNY crumples up the letter in his hand, then wipes his eyes and lets out a sob.)

(Lights go down.)

THE END

My bio: Martha Patterson has written more than 100 plays and has had work published in four anthologies by the International Centre for Women Playwrights and several collections by JAC Publishing and Original Works Publishing. Her work has been produced Off-Off-Broadway and in the UK, Korea, and Australia, as well as in twelve states around the USA. She has also had a half-hour mystery produced by Shoestring Radio Theatre in San Francisco. She earned her B.A. from Mount Holyoke College and an M.A. from Emerson College, both degrees in Theatre. She is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America, the International Centre for Women Playwrights, Screen Actors Guild, and Actors' Equity Association. She lives in Boston, Massachusetts.