

Couvade

(AT RISE: the stage is bare. A young man, wearing blue jeans, boots but no shirt, stands with his back to the audience. Around his waist, a belt with two holsters, each sporting a pearl-hand-led revolver.)

A

(Whirling around to face the audience as he pulls both revolvers out of their holsters) WE JUST CONCEIVED. (He raises the revolvers.) Three weeks, to the day, that's all it took. (He aims the revolvers.) You call that trying? I don't call that trying. I call that doing what comes naturally. (He pretends to fire.) POW. POW. POW. Just like that. Must be some kind of record. (He returns the revolvers to their holsters.) Why, I know people who've tried, tried HARD, for months--years--taken medicine, all kinds of things. They just didn't have what it takes, I guess. Unkind, but true. It's just chemistry. Chemistry, and a little luck--but mostly chemistry.

I mean... How many times in your frigging life do you get to walk down the street and say to yourself WE JUST CONCEIVED? Even if you're really active, you can probably only get it to happen five or six times in your entire life. But just think--each time it does happen, you get to walk down the street in the heat of the blazing sun or the winter wind or whatever with this foolish grin on your face, thinking so loud you don't know why people don't turn around and look at you-- thinking, "We just conceived.... Hey--you bastards out there, why don't you hear me? WE JUST CONCEIVED..." Maybe I don't mean anything to you, maybe you don't like my jeans, or my boots--or what about my hair--yeah, not too clean. But if you could just hear me singing inside.... (A does a step or two, singing.) WE....JUST....CONCEIVED.... Happy birthday. Merry Christmas. Blessed Easter. Joyous Fourth of July. Best New Years Eve Yet.... All the holidays wrapped up together... (He hugs himself, whirls around.)

Now, wait a minute, here. All right, folks. This is serious. (He places his hands on his stomach.) WE ARE STARTING TO SHOW. This... little bulge, here. That's it. That's what I'm talking about. Right here. I know it's nothing much, yet--but, believe me, it's the start of something big! If you could have seen how FLAT it was before, you'd appreciate the

difference... (Hands on revolvers) It.... counts. I tell you, god-damn it, it COUNTS! Belt's tight. I'll have to loosen it a notch. (A does so) There, that's better. And--no more monthly mess! I mean, count your blessings--(takes Tampax from pocket, drops it on the floor.) Now, wait.... (He turns in a circle, slowly.)

It's two months along now, folks. Do you hear that? (A places his hands on his stomach.) Look at the way this little sucker has grown! I mean, is this a belly, or is this a belly? And it's gonna get bigger, it's going to have to get bigger because that's what we call Nature's Way.... Of course.... ugh.... Can't eat much anymore. Just--crackers! And they.... kind of.... stick! (He turns full circle again.) Another month just passed like in the night. (He places his hands on his stomach.) A little more progress has been made. Seeing is believing, right? And what you see right here is three months along, three good, solid months, and I believe you can say we are over any uncertainty, any little feeling that maybe something MIGHT GO WRONG. (A whispers the last words, then speaks in the doctor's voice.) Of course we have a really good doc, see him every month: "We have to be a little careful, the first trimester...." Well, we're passed that now, and the fun can really begin because everyone can see it now, everyone.... (He struts up and down.) It's still a little too soon to shop for maternity outfits and so everyone can see and should see that something.... a little something... is on its way. (He stops, loosens the belt another notch.) Course, there are certain drawbacks. Feet, start to swell some, not to mention the ankles--they swell more than some. But the energy is there, the sleep is O.K. we're not dealing with that little old problem of THROWING UP anymore. No, Sir, we licked that problem--not really a problem, anyway. We all have it the first... ah.... trimester.

(Slowly, he turns full circle.) Would you believe it. As the saying goes, time flies.... (He places his hands on his stomach.) Yes. NOW is the time to shop for maternity outfits, skirts with big holes in them, elephant pants with elastic panels... We're going to have a whole new wardrobe and I won't care if it means we can't EAT for the next few months or they cut off the god-damned ELECTRICITY or... (He feels for the revolvers.)

(Brightening) Did I just say EAT? Who cares about EAT? I mean, isn't this a case of being fed from the inside? Talk about not seeing the forest for the trees....

We are just about at the time that.... I mean, we ARE at the time that we've been waiting for for six solid months. Do you get me? We only have THREE MORE MONTHS TO GO. Now do you see any reason to get down at the mouth? O.K. I know--the feet are starting to swell more, the ankles are out to THERE, but you have to pay something, you know, some little thing for the PRIVILEGE of bringing this.. BEING.. into the world.... (He loosens his belt another notch. It slides down to his feet. He steps out of it.) I mean, in this life, you have to give something for each thing you get, know what I mean?

(A places his hand on his stomach.) My God! What was that? I never felt anything like that before! It was like a flutter. A butterfly-wing brushing--something like that... Was that....? You think it could have been? Already? (Gasping) There--there it is again! No doubt about it, this time. That's the.... What do you call it? The... QUICKENING? (Pause. A stands with his hands on his stomach.) Yeah--that's it, all right. It's alive, in there. (Speaking to his stomach) Hey. You. Yes, you in there. Can you kindly limit the kicking or whatever it is to the hours between 10 A.M. and midnight? And.... By the way.... (whispering) WHAT ARE YOU?

(A imitates the doctor's voice) "Now, this is just a little procedure. What we call a LITTLE PROCEDURE. Do you get it? Do you comprenez? No, it will not hurt--I repeat, it will not hurt. So what if every doctor when you were a kid said it will not hurt just when it was going to hurt like hell? Is that my fault? O.K. Now. We do this to all our little parents-to-be just to get a picture of that little cuss, in there, kind of find out something about it, make sure everything is absolutely OK 100 percent PERFECT....

(A's own voice, meekly) Yes Sir.

(Imitating doctor's voice) "Now, if you'll just stretch out on this table here and relax. Just doze right off, if you can, it won't matter at all. All Miss Shiela here is going to do is aim this great big old eye right at that cute little popping-out belly of yours.... O.K. Now, Miss Shiela. That's it. Ready.... Aim... FIRE."

PAUSE

(A shouts) IT'S A BOY!!

(Quietly) I guess I don't have to tell you the way I felt. I mean. Right here inside of me. A boy. I always wanted a boy. I mean, when I was a boy, I wanted a boy, and when I grew up, I

wanted one even more. Something about repeating yourself. Replacing yourself. (He shouts) IT'S A BOY! DO YOU ALL HEAR THAT, OUT HERE? Due to the miracle of modern science, we don't have to wait till it's actually born, we can know when we're only SIX MONTHS ALONG!

Did I say, six months? (He turns slowly, full circle) Well, the time has been passing me by and now it's SIX MONTHS! Did you hear that? We're in the home stretch now. A nap, every day. Lots of good veggies. (Hate em). Lots of good milks. (Hate that, too.) Legs hurting most all the time. Have to keep weight off our feet. (A stage hand brings on a chair.) Thanks. (Sits down) People on the bus stand up all the time, now, never have to ask, anymore--they SEE the situation, they know--perfect strangers ask me, on the street, "How long now?" It looks like the whole world knows... (Yawning) Go to see the doc every two weeks, now.. Just feel like dozing off sometimes and letting everything take care of itself. I mean.... That's nature's way, right? (He is mumbling, half-asleep.) Isn't that the way it always is? (He turns the chair full circle.)

SEVEN MONTHS. (Waking up) Did I say SEVEN MONTHS? My God. Would you look at that (A examines his stomach.) I mean, it's out on my god-damned KNEES. I never have seen a belly like this one before. Belly button turned inside out. Wonder will it ever turn inside again? Veins.... Great big purple babies. And what are these? Claw marks? That what they call STRETCH MARKS? My God. They going to go away once this is all over? (Rubbing stomach) Got to keep the skin lubricated so it can go on STRETCHING...

(Turns chair full circle) EIGHT MONTHS. Now, this is nearly it. I mean, we're almost right up to the finish line. Can't sleep on my back anymore now, it digs right into my spine. And kicks. Right up against my back bone. (Speaking to stomach) Hey--you in there. Little boy. Didn't anybody ever teach you not to KICK? Christ, I can feel his elbow... Or is it his toe? Too big for a toe. The knee?

(Turns chair full circle) NINE MONTHS. My God. This is it. We're here. We've got the little suitcase packed. We've got all the telephone numbers written down. We always keep a full tank of gas. Every night we go to sleep not knowing WHERE we'll wake up... (He examines his stomach.) This thing is kind of out-of-proportion, don't you think? I mean, when you remember how small a kid is when he's first born, and then you look at this....

(A imitates the doctor's voice.) "You may have to be patient a while longer. First babies are like that. They just don't seem to be in a hurry to come into the world. Like to hang around in there where it's warm and dark..."

(A, meekly) Anything you say, Doc. Just tell me it's going to come SOMETIME.

(A imitates doctor's voice) "Of course it's going to come sometime. What do you think?"

(A, very softly) I think I might blow up.

PAUSE

(A is feeling his stomach. A startled expression.) My God. What was that? Felt like some kind of a... cramp. Muscle spasm. My God. Call the doc. This is it! Do you hear me? THIS IS IT. (A runs around the stage.) THIS IS IT THIS IS IT THIS IS IT. (Lights up. A stops, feels his stomach.) Now, listen, you in there. Don't panic. Nothing to be afraid of. Just go with the waves. Just.... swim....

(A's face contorts.) My God. That.... HURTS. Say--in there--you know what you're doing to me? Christ! Don't do THAT again. Hey--that's my back. You're not supposed to be fucking with my back. Stick to my belly, will you? (A doubles over in pain) No--not that side, you idiot--that's my weak side--try the other side, will you, for Christ's sake? No! God! Is that what you call an improvement? That's a god-damned torture--that's what it is--My God! Don't you care what you're doing to me? You're tearing me apart. Hear that? YOU'RE TEARING ME APART!

(A collapses onto chair, sits huddled, jerking spasmodically.)

How long do you think I can--my God! What am I expected to be? Superhuman? How can I bear this... No, not there! Try the other side, will you? Christ. No. Go back to the other side, that was better--

(A imitates doctor's voice.) "That's right. Lie on your back. Little examination, that's all, to see how far along--"

(A yells) NO GODDAMN IT! No little examination. Get your goddamned hands out of me can't you see I'm in PAIN?

(A imitates doctor's voice.) "Sorry. Must do.... (A writhes) There. That's it for now. You're progressing nicely. Already two centimeters dilated and you only have to get to ten, and you've got all night and all tomorrow too if necessary. Now just lie there and rest while I call the nurse to prep you."

(A speaks in a small voice) No.

(A imitates the doctor's voice) "Just routine."

(A, very small voice) No.....

(Doctor) "Sorry....."

(A leaps from chair, shouting) I DON'T WANT TO BE SHAVED. Nobody told me I was going to have to be shaved. If I'd known----- (He stops, stands rigidly.)

(A: doctor's voice) "There. That's over with."

(A sags in chair.)

(A: doctor's voice) "Now we have to-----"

(A leaps from chair, shouting) I WILL NOT HAVE AN ENEMA. I'm not constipated, I just went this morning. Why do I have to have an enema? What's that got to do with having a baby... It's FOR the baby? Why is it for the baby? Why does the baby care whether I have a bowel movement or not?

(A sags in chair.) O.K. Do it. For the baby....

PAUSE

(A begins to groan rhythmically.) O, God. This is it. I can't stop it. Hand me a wet washrag. Hand me a stopwatch. I want to see how far apart.... (Groans loudly.) That was a hard one. All right. No, I am calm, I have two minutes till the next one. I have to concentrate, breathe. I can't afford to panic. Not now. Breathe. One, two, three. One, two, three. Oh my God. I can feel it coming. All the muscles tensing. OW. OW. DO SOMETHING, SOMEBODY---

(A leaps from the chair shouting) No, not that. That's not what I mean. Don't come at me with that needle. I hate needles. I faint when I see needles....

(A drops to all fours, crawls across the stage towards his revolvers)

You stick me with that goddamned yard-long needle you'll see what I'll stick in you. (As he is about to reach the revolvers, he is felled by another contraction.) Oh, my God..... (Groans, huddling on the stage.) OK.... DO IT...

PAUSE

How long before it starts to work? It's already started to work? Funny.... I don't feel.... (Startled) Blood. No. Dear God, no. Not blood. It's.... seawater. Salty. (Raising his head) the waters just broke. My God. I'm.... flooded... (Sinks down on the stage again.) No, I'm not fighting it, I swear, I'm just trying to go along with it---(Groans, mumbles, suddenly screams, springs to his feet.)

GOD DAMN IT NO.....

(A stands calmly, speaks normally) There. That one's over. That was a good one. I'll say it was a good one. Few more like that, you won't have to worry about me anymore.... Just talking to pass the time till the next one... Wait a minute. It hasn't been a minute yet. Doc said it would be a minute, in between...

(A sits in the chair, grips the arm, grows rigid, holds his breath, grimaces) OW OW OW OW OW.....

(A speaks calmly) There. That one's over. That was another good one. I'll say. Now one more good one. Is that what I'm supposed to be hoping for? Then you're going to tell me to what? To PUSH? What do you mean, push? What've I been doing for the last three hours? You don't call that PUSHING? (Speaking rapidly, beginning to grimace, gripping arms of the chair) Well if you don't call that pushing what in the name of God do you call it... Oh my God, it's coming, it's almost here, I haven't had time to get my breath..... OW OW OW OW OW....

(A speaks calmly) No. I don't want to put my feet in the stirrups. No I don't want you to tie down my hands. What has putting my feet in the stirrups or tying down my hands got to do with---

(A struggles to escape from the chair.)

Goddamn it, leave me alone, I need to catch my breath before it begins again.... Oh God, I can feel it coming... Get your goddamned hands off me.... (kicking) Get those goddamned stirrups...

(A stops, freezes, grips the arms of the chair) OW OW OW OW OW.

(Voice, off) PUSH PUSH PUSH PUSH PUSH.

(A speaks calmly.) Look, doc, I'm doing the best I can. But seriously, I don't know how much longer I can go on with this. I mean, this is really taking everything out of me, you know what I mean? I mean, you can only expect me to take it for so long----

(A grimaces) Oh God. Here it comes. Do something, Doc, do something----

(A stops, freezes, grips the arms of the chair) OW OW OW OW---

(Voice, off) PUSH PUSH PUSH PUSH.

(A screams. Baby crying, off)

PAUSE

(A slumps in the chair. Baby's crying, off, continues. Slowly, A revives. Sits up. Looks around.)

(A speaks softly) I didn't do too bad, did I? I screamed. I know I screamed. I heard it. But I didn't do too bad.... (Baby continues to cry, off. A listens, smiles.)

(A speaks softly) Say, doc... I really would like to see him. You know? I really would like to check out all his little fingers and toes. Five fingers on each hand. No. Four fingers and a thumb. Small thumb. Fingers not too big, either. Five toes. One big toe, and four little ones. Little ones not much bigger than grains of sand.... (He gets up from chair) Little.... penis. Yes. Not so much of a one, yet.... But it's all there, and it's all healthy, well-formed. Little pink gums, tongue like a cat's.... Two shell ears. Pink. Few little strands of dark hair... Little belly button... (He goes to belt, picks it up, buckles it on.) Not connected anymore. Little twist of a cord left, on top of the knot.... Little dried drop of blood. Flat chest, big shoulders, like me, little carrot of a neck... (He takes pistols out of holsters, checks them. He raises one pistol, aims it, then replaces it in its holster.)

(He turns, holds out his arms.) All perfect. All ready. (He continues to hold out his arms as

CURTAIN