

Selfish Creatures

By Emma Stapp

Cast of Characters:

RUTHIE: 70 years old, unmarried, hermit, nervous, JUDIE'S daughter

JUDIE: 88 years old, bitter and unloving, RUTHIE'S mother

Setting:

Rustic family home in modern-day Mississippi

(At Rise:) The stage is set as a rundown living room, obviously occupied by elderly women based on the outdated, worn décor and furniture.

(Lights Up:) JUDIE sits on the sofa, dozing off while the radio softly plays. A moment later, RUTHIE enters from stage left and takes a seat on the sofa next to HER mother.

RUTHIE (off):

(yelling despite the short distance between them) You hungry, Ma?! I'm thinking of fixing some ambrosia salad!

JUDIE:

(rolling HER eyes and yelling right back) It's two o'clock in the afternoon, Ruthie! Who in their right mind wants ambrosia at two o'clock in the afternoon?!

RUTH:

Who said you were in your right mind, Ma?

JUDIE rolls her eyes again, and RUTHIE enters from stage left, taking a seat next to HER mother while smoothing out the wrinkles in HER nightgown.

JUDIE:

Oh, would you hush for Chrissake? It's no wonder you never found a husband with such a smart mouth.

RUTHIE:

(offended but quick with a response) Well, at least I'm not an old widow like you.

JUDIE:

(laughing slyly) Like being a bitter old maid is much better? You're a joke, Ruthie. Always were.

RUTHIE:

Oh, and you aren't? Folks stare at the both of us when we go to the market. They know what we are.

JUDIE:

And what would that be, ever-wise Ruthie? What do you suppose we are?

RUTHIE:

Exactly what we look like. A couple of hags with nothing to do but sit and argue.

JUDIE:

Well, I reckon they're right. Maybe if you had bothered to get yourself a man, we wouldn't be sitting in this house all the time. You were born in this house Ruthie, and I'm willing to bet you'll die in it, too. Have you any idea how pathetic that is?

RUTHIE:

Oh, I think I might have some idea, Mother. You've only been shaming me about it for the past 70 years. Ya know, I get so sick of all your criticism.

JUDIE:

Gee, Ruthie, I hate that for you. But ya know something? I get pretty damn sick of you piddling around, making flavorless ambrosia and eating it alone when you should be enjoying grandchildren and living your life!

RUTHIE:

(seething with anger) Shut up! Just shut the hell up! One of these days, I'm gonna knock the living daylight out of you, old woman!

JUDIE:

(grinning sarcastically) Sure, you will. That's just right of you to say. *One of these days. One of these days, I'll learn to play piano. One of these days, I'll get a job, I'll meet a nice man, I'll have lots of children. One of these days, I'll knock you out, Ma.* Just once, Ruthie, can you just do what you say you will? I never met anybody so bent on lying.

RUTHIE:

Oh, you wanna talk about lying, Ma? Let's talk about it. How about when you lied to Daddy all those years? You never loved him. Or if you did, you sure had a funny way of showing it. Everybody knew that you were seeing every Tom, Dick, and Harry in the county! And you want to talk to me about lying.

JUDIE:

How dare you? You petty fool. You know absolutely nothing about me and your father. He sure as hell wasn't a saint, you're just too blind to see that. Everybody is. They talk about him like he was some god amongst men. I say he was a worthless, spineless drunk who didn't deserve what he had.

RUTHIE:

At least he cared! At least he had the decency to tell me he loved me every once in a while! He would never speak to me the way you do.

JUDIE:

Oh, don't start with that. You didn't know him like I did. I can assure you that anything good he ever told you was a product of his drunkenness. He would be so ashamed of you.

RUTHIE:

Why? Because I live with such a miserable hag? Because I've wasted my entire life trying to make you see me? It's you, Ma. Don't you get it? You are the reason I never found anybody. The reason I never looked. I chose to sign away my right to happiness because I thought you'd love me if I took care of you. I was wrong. I always am, right Ma?

JUDIE:

Don't you dare try to make yourself a martyr. You made your bed, and now you're lying in it. Don't even try to blame me for your pitiful state. You're a coward, Ruthie, and you know it. You were beautiful. You could have had any boy you wanted, but you chose to hide behind your books and your smarts, and you sent away anybody who ever thought about getting close to you. You're a coward and a hypocrite, and I can never act as though you aren't.

RUTHIE:

(tears welling in HER eyes) Damn you, woman. Damn you! You have never said a kind word in your life. You love to tell me every wrong thing me or Daddy or anybody else ever did, but nobody's keeping score. Just you. And you have no right to condemn others for what they say or do because if every cross word you said were a sin, you'd bust the gates of hell wide open. I make no aim to please you anymore. I simply live under this roof because I have nowhere else to go. If I had my way, I would kick you out onto the street with nothing but your bruised ego. But I won't. Because then, I'd be giving you exactly what you want.

JUDIE:

(with a challenging look in HER eyes) And what exactly is it that I want, since you're such an expert on how my mind works?

RUTHIE:

You want me to be just as hateful as you are. You want everyone to be as miserable and angry as you are. But I'll never give you the satisfaction. I'll continue to walk through this house like a ghost. I'll hum, and I'll fix dinner, and I'll even iron your clothes, but I will not let you see me break.

A beat.

JUDIE:

You're right. I won't ever see you break. You were born broken, Ruthie. You were a mistake. The biggest mistake I ever made.

After hearing this, RUTHIE begins to laugh hysterically. SHE makes HER way over to the radio, putting the volume as high as it will go. Jazz music blares loudly, and RUTHIE sways to the music, unable to stop laughing.

JUDIE:

(raising HER voice over the music) What's so damn funny? And would you turn that down? It's giving me a headache!

RUTHIE:

(doubled over laughing) Headache? I'm sorry, Ma! I'm so sorry I've given you a headache! *(her laughter becomes more intense with each word, her hysteria clearly developing)*

JUDIE:

(sensing RUTHIE's decline and adapting) It's... it's alright, dear. Why don't you sit down?

RUTHIE:

Sit down? Why would I want to do that, Ma? I'm dancing! You always wanted me to go to one of the dances in town, but I didn't need to! I've got my very own dance hall right here.

JUDIE stands up slowly, making HER way over to RUTHIE. SHE takes HER daughter's hands and tries to lead HER back to the sofa. RUTHIE instead leads HER mother in dancing to the music. The two of them hold hands and sway back and forth, awkward tension building with each movement.

JUDIE:

Ruthie... let go of me. I don't want to dance.

RUTHIE's grip becomes tighter, enough to hurt JUDIE.

JUDIE:

Ruthie, let go, please! You're hurting me! Let's just sit down, all right?

RUTHIE:

Don't talk to me like I'm a child! It's too late! You know you can't talk to me that way. Just let me dance. I swear, Ma, I don't know what I'm about to do if you don't just let me keep dancing.

JUDIE:

I don't understand it. I never have. If you don't want me to speak to you like a child, you shouldn't act like one! I know you claim that these little outbursts of yours are beyond your control, but you're throwing a tantrum! Now, let go of my arms this instant, you're going to leave bruises!

RUTHIE:

What about my bruises, huh? You could at least pretend to care about how I feel. I can't do this anymore. You're right. I'm not strong enough.

JUDIE:

It's about time you realized that.

RUTHIE lets go of JUDIE's arms dramatically. Then, RUTHIE shoves JUDIE with all her might. JUDIE lands on the ground with a loud thump, and the room goes silent, the music coming to an abrupt stop. RUTHIE stands over her mother, shocked but proud. SHE resumes HER twisted laughter.

RUTHIE:

(through HER fit of laughter) Ma? Get up, Ma. You gotta admit, I have more strength than you thought. I'm better than you thought. You were wrong! Wrong, Ma, and you always were! Come on, get up. This is starting to get old.

JUDIE remains still on the floor. RUTHIE leans down next to JUDIE, touching her face lightly. SHE is unresponsive.

RUTHIE:

(frantically) GET UP! Right now, dammit! You can't do this. You cannot be *this*...

JUDIE's eyes open slowly, and SHE is immediately filled with confusion upon waking. RUTHIE watches as SHE gathers her thoughts, until JUDIE's eyes become filled with rage at what had occurred.

JUDIE:

(hoarse but furious) What is wrong with you?! How could you hit your own mother? You knocked me to the floor, for Chrissake! I am nearly 90 years old, you could have killed me!

RUTHIE:

I wish I had!

After saying this, RUTHIE stares at the floor with anger and a tinge of regret. JUDIE stares at HER daughter in shock at the brutally honest confession. A moment passes before either of them builds the strength to speak again.

JUDIE:

(a beat, then with an uncharacteristically soft face and tone) You don't mean that, Ruthie.

RUTHIE:

That's the thing, Ma- I do mean it! I really, really do! Do you have any idea how hard it is to wish death upon the person I should love most?

JUDIE continues to stare at HER daughter, a flicker of anger in HER glassy eyes.

RUTHIE sits back down on the sofa, letting out a long sigh. JUDIE follows suit and sits next to HER.

JUDIE:

(sorrowful) You really hate me that much?

RUTHIE:

(surprised at HER mother's question but keeping HER guard up) Well... yes. Yes, I do. I hate to say it, but I think it was quite obvious anyway.

JUDIE:

(staring at the ground) What happened to us, Ruthie? How did we get like this?

RUTHIE:

I can't answer that, Ma. I wish I knew. I always thought maybe me and you- we just weren't meant to be a family. Daddy was the only thing holding us together, and since he's been gone, we just don't have anything left to give.

JUDIE:

(fighting off tears) I think you're right. Believe it or not, I do miss your father. He may have been a worthless bum, but by God, he was my worthless bum.

RUTHIE:

(chuckling lightly) I miss him too.

JUDIE looks at RUTHIE nostalgically and turns to face RUTHIE, holding HER hand gently. RUTHIE looks at JUDIE surprisedly and stiffens but eventually eases into the unusual affection.

JUDIE:

(genuinely) I'm sorry, Ruthie. I failed you. I failed your father. Hell, I even failed myself. I knew I wasn't cut out to be a mother. I just don't have it in me. That's why I say you were a mistake. I think it was a mistake for you to be given to me. You're good, Ruthie. Better than I could ever hope to be. And I have no idea how you managed to get that way. You certainly didn't get it

from me. In fact, I think you're good despite me. All the regrets in my life, I swear you aren't one of them. I just wish the world had given you a chance.

RUTHIE:

(hopeful but disappointed) Where was all this a few dozen years ago? I'm thankful to hear it, but why now, when it's too late?

JUDIE:

It's not too late, Ruthie. Almost, but not yet.

Struck with the implication of her mother's words, RUTHIE's face softens, and SHE squeezes HER mother's hand, a silent acknowledgement of HER words.

RUTHIE:

(a beat, then tenderly) Oh... oh, don't think like that. You're alright, I don't know anybody as resilient as you are.

JUDIE:

Come on, now. I don't like thinking about it either, but I'm only getting older. Death is like my shadow, and it's catching up to me pretty quick these days. Makes me angry, to tell ya the truth. I've been spinning on this rock longer than most, and I've somehow managed to waste every moment of my time here thinking only of myself. Wanna know the worst part of it all? I'm not even worth wasting time on. It really is like my mother told me and hers before told her- *a woman is a selfish creature.*

RUTHIE:

(curiously) I don't know if that's true, Ma. You are many things, but I don't believe that selfish is one of them. You were by no means a perfect mother. To be frank, I'm not so sure you were even a decent mother. But you did what you could. That's more than some can say. Besides... *(a brief pause)* you're all I've got. It's just me and you, Ma. Somehow, we'll have to learn to make that enough.

JUDIE:

How come you still take care of me after everything I've put you through? Why are you still good to me?

RUTHIE:

(humorously, eyebrows raised) Uh, Ma... you seem to be forgetting that I just knocked you into next Tuesday.

JUDIE:

(laughing lightly) Oh, I haven't forgotten. But that was one moment. One moment in your life where you did something you shouldn't have. I don't even have the brains to count how many of those moments I've had, so I can hardly condemn you for it.

RUTHIE:

Damn, Ma, if I had known all it took to get you to open up was a good ole brawl, I would have knocked you down years ago!

The two of them share a laugh for the first time in years, if ever. They look at each other contentedly

JUDIE:

(wiping tears of laughter from HER cheeks) Look, Ruthie, I don't have much time left. I don't want to spend the rest of it arguing with you over this and that. I want moments like this. It doesn't matter if you have a husband or a family of your own. You are my family, and I'm yours. The sooner we both learn that and move on together, the better.

Suddenly, RUTHIE wraps HER mother in an embrace. Both women are a bit uncomfortable at first but eventually find comfort with each other. A moment passes while they hold each other, a moment of quiet reflection. As abruptly as their hug began, they parted, smiling knowingly at each other.

RUTHIE:

I think I can handle that, Ma.

JUDIE:

I think you can handle anything, Ruthie. *(proudly)* After all, you are my daughter.

RUTHIE:

(with confidence and sweetness) I certainly am.

JUDIE:

(jokingly but with finality) Now, let's go see about that ambrosia salad!

They laugh lightly, and JUDIE rises, extending HER

*hand. RUTHIE takes it, and
they walk toward the kitchen,
exiting through stage left.*

(end of play)