

MARGOT GIBLIN

ABORT

She pissed as carefully as she could into a small Vegemite jar, then wiped the sides and carried the warm jar upstairs to her bedroom and the pregnancy testing kit.

The directions said place it somewhere that doesn't vibrate. How much vibration, she wondered. Would her footsteps on these old floorboards be too much? The dog bounding across the room? She set it up and poured it in. To be left for two hours.

What to do for two hours while your life clears up or fouls up. No ring and you're not pregnant. A ring, you are. Why not an exclamation mark, she thought, or a star? Where's their sense of the ridiculous? Downstairs she went, leaving it to make the news, although she knew, she absolutely knew. Despite which, please, oh please, let it not be.

It was a Saturday morning. The sun was shining. Five years later she can still remember that. But what, in those two hours, she did, she cannot recall. Did she sit down to read the paper, eat some toast and honey, take the dog for a walk? How far from the house would she have gone, and in which direction? Could she have gone out at all?

Back upstairs then, two hours later, to sit so precisely positioned on the bed, eyes closed, head tilted down slightly, that when she turned, just so far to the right and opened her eyes, the line of vision was directly to the answer, reflected in the little slanted mirror. The truth, oblique.

Now crystallized, a perfect circlet showed like darker sand on light. Quite pretty and complete. These kits might say not pregnant when you were, but never the reverse. She remembers the decision not to cry. Not yet. She had some punishing stuff to do first.

She arrived late at the seminar. Late enough for the people there to be taking themselves more and each other less seriously on questions of morality. She sat and smiled at somebody she knew, looked back at somebody she didn't, as they turned around to see who this might be, coming in so late. She tried at least to look as if she was listening but it was hard to connect at all by now. She was relieved when it was finished and she could move back over to the door and the fire-escape. On the downward scamper she had a sense of purpose but this soon left her as she wandered through the crowded market, still not connecting, still trying to look in touch.

At night she had to waitress and this was tedious with nausea at her throat and mouth and carrying laden plates of pork and steak and chips with smiles. It was easier, though, than asking for time off and when

she'd finished, bent on seeing this lousy day to its woeful end, she went back to the Festival of Arts, and as expected nothing worked, and what was more, while clowns and mime dragged on she saw him. It was partly why she'd come, the expectation that she would. In profile, at this distance, he was contained and unapproachable — the same as when in bed, when touching, being touched by her, in truth. Her best friend Helen plonked down and told straight off of a family brawl caused by, this time, the differences between her elder sister and herself. They were basic. Ideological. Profound. Five years later, in the Doghouse, leaning at the bar and Helen's leg in plaster from a clowning work-shop fall she thinks I'll bet you don't recall that conversation, nor would I, if not for that neat ring. That is the thing about the positive result. It changes everything, immediately, in ways you wouldn't have foretold. It changed, she remembers, the way she heard the story Helen told while she was listening — the family brawl caused by the several sided question of abortion on demand. Availability, she thought, that was least of it, while he was over there, so cool, so cold.

Three days she waited, the time determined by the last of his exams, by which time a blood test had confirmed it. Which was not what she told him as he sat beside her on a bench, against a brick wall in the sun, at mid-day, legs stretched out in front. She told him that she thought she was, in case he said tough shit. He didn't though. It was, he said, the worst thing that had ever happened to him. It had ruined his life, he said. She put out a feeler — what to do, if she was? Without a pause he asked her if she'd ever had an abortion. And so she knew that what she had decided on was what she'd do but she was hurt by the assumption, nothing else discussed. O.K. she said, she'd know for sure tomorrow, the test results would tell. I'll be around, he said, to talk about it, what we're going to do. What time will you know by?

He came, she said she was and that she'd book herself into a Melbourne clinic in a week or two. He said I wish you wouldn't talk as if this thing is only about you. It's us, he said and I'd appreciate support. Support? This took her by storm over dinner, Pumpkin Eater, candle-lit, accused him of ego-laden thoughts and said he only wanted to come to Melbourne too to satisfy his needs, not hers. She wanted him badly still and lashed out demanding more, rejecting what he offered for she knew if she weren't pregnant now they wouldn't be together, candle-lit or not. She said you're just sensation seeking, I'd rather go alone. Oh well, he said, I'm coming anyway. She thought I'll cope with the foetus being removed but not so well with you not wanting me. Suppress the thought that Melbourne's on the way to Sydney anyway, where he is headed home for holidays.

She had to wait two weeks to give the foetus time to grow enough to be removed complete and in that time she worked, felt sick and listened to the muzacked Christmas carols drivel on. Their sound will stay for years, a threaded reminder of this mucked up time. She went to lunch with Mum and Dad one Sunday, forcing down the food to hide the fact and looking with them at distant yachts and chatting and not saying a word.

Thursday the ninth day of December, 1982. This is the day that she'll wake up with it in her and go to sleep without. They sit beside each other on the plane — strange trip to take together, both aware, as through the air and streets and rooms they go.

The interview, the question, the response. They go together next to eat at Blemishes and then, like tourists filling in the hour, into the library — such things they're doing together now they've never done before. They separate to look at books and big ones full of movie stars is all she can take. She held one open where she stands and looks from it across the purple carpet to him, his spot, his book. She watches him and thinks we're not and never will be close enough for me to share that thought with you. You're not, you never have been, never wanted, anything really to do with me.

Still time to kill so when they see a church they go inside. They tilt their chins as they look up and around. It's Catholic and so is he — is that what makes it hard for him, she wonders. Hardly. They don't discuss. The candles burn.

The waiting-room again and now she's glad he's here, on any terms. The operating room, the table, doctor's smile and now her body shakes, convulses, fights. The doctor, worried, thinks she's gone against the anaesthetic — these his words. Let him think. She knows her body doesn't want this done, instructed by her mind, don't let it go, the link with him, the one who waits outside. As nothing's said the Valium's eased into her, directly to the vein, and they go on.

The foetus is removed and she comes out doped to the eyeballs but shaking still so to an empty room that's hers until she stops. Then he is there and she is wild because it's over now but acts the part of hating to be seen like this and he says Sssh, and strokes her hand and this she hates for what she sees it is — he's getting his money's worth all right, the nurse looks on, she witnesses — nice bloke.

An hour or so, the bleeding checked, the pep talk from the woman, who, while handing her the Pill, says soothingly — There, there, you'll be all right. I know, God damn you, I know I'll be all right, that's just the bloody point.

They catch a tram or cab. She can't remember which, years later, just the hovering kerbside debate. She knows she did decide to skip the plane that night — just too upset you see, to go back home alone. So she terminal and cancel the flight and ring back home to check with Di the dog's all right and then ring work to say I won't be in tonight and Kath just laughs and says — Ah, having a good time, are you? — because they think she's up the coast and tears pour down her face as she says, Yes, I am.

A travel bureau woman, her eyes like a kangaroo's, the lashes are so long, finds them a room and makes them laugh. She likes the memory of her for that, thinks warmly of her, sometimes, still. The hotel then, and lift and maze of halls and doors and at last number something, it is theirs and in they go and she lies down and curls for sleep but doesn't fall before she's seen him perching on the single bed, arms tightly folded, leaning forward. I'm hardly going to touch you now, she thinks, relax. And finally he does, and comes to lie down all the world away along the very edge, the far side of the double bed and she is satisfied with that but wonders as she drifts if he has moved for a better angle on T.V. which blares. He is considerate. He turns it down.

She wakes. He sleeps, and while he does she turns the pages of This Week in Melbourne, decides she wants to eat Mongolian and waits for him to wake to see if he does too. The answer's yes so off they go and buy a bottle on the way, with care. She feels sick now but keeps on walking, planning as she goes exactly where to aim the vomit when it comes, but makes it, not to Mongolia, that's too far, but Italy. They eat and drink and listen to the conversations all around. There's not a lot from them. They leave and she could faint if only she knew how but walks again, into an ice-cream parlour now, he fancies some. The choice is vast, the colours plead, and she thinks no, but hears herself say yes, vanilla, please to be there too. She drops it as they cross the road and looks at white on bitumen and thinks a helicopter lift to bed is all I want, that's where I need to be.

In bed, where on the edge of sleep her body jerks awake and that was real but the response she got was touch and so she kept it up, to be calmed down, hair stroked, that's nice at any price, she stretches out, looks there and watches as he puts his thumb to middle nail, deliberately and flicks her erect nipple, casually. She barely feels it but she knows it is the coldest thing she'd ever want to see.

Next day he said he'd ring her soon. He comes out on the airport bus with her. She tries to tell herself he does this out of care — not just because there's nothing else to do, an empty day to fill before his evening bus.

Back home and waitressing that night and everything's the same and she's all right except one moment when she reaches out to write the order "Pork" on the earlobe of him who orders it but stops herself in time. Home, sleep and wait and wait and wait. The phone rings all right, in several days, and they talk on — yes, I'm all right, and how are you. She says I'll write, and does. He rings again and says he'll write but not til after Christmas now, which comes and goes and New Year too while she thinks any day now, any time.

The day there is a letter upside down beneath the slot and she thinks this is it at last — it is a bill, of course, the blood-test.

When it does come it seems the sort of letter you would write to a nice aunt, of whom you're fond, with weather out of date and a list of what you got for Christmas, what you did. So she wrote back in kind, not just the tone, but spelling out Dear Nephew, and so on until the letter's end. She sometimes wonders, as now with Helen, if he thought she had gone raving mad, or understood. Whichever, or whatever else he thought, he didn't write again.